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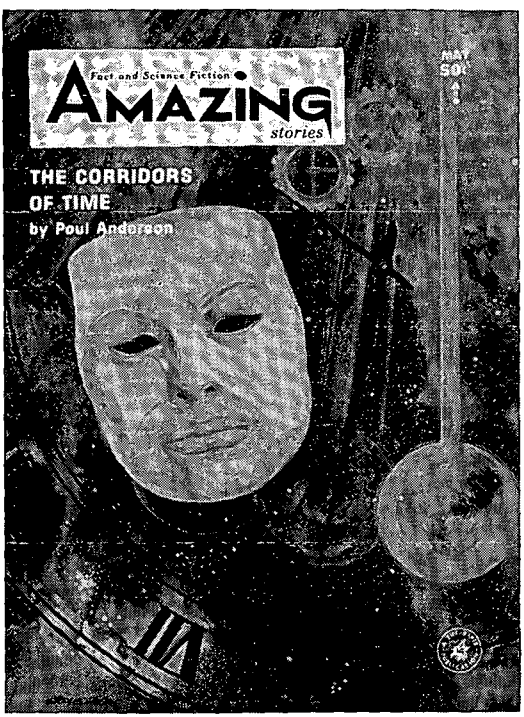

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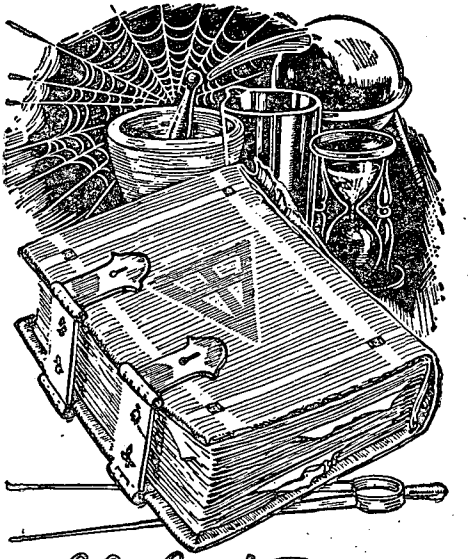

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FANTASTIC

MAY 1965
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SOME issues back—in January, to be exact—this space mused on the satisfactions derived from reading about the adventures of John Jakes' Brak the Barbarian. Yet a reader whose letter we quoted demurred, saying: "Brak is no barbarian. What is he?" Shortly thereafter, author Jakes arose to defend his hero, and the following ("My first and last word on the subject, I swear") is from Brak's creator:

"It is considered unseemly for writers to write letters of argument about their creations. But I can't resist. There is indeed a Grail-like quality about Khurdisan. But I know, incidentally, what will happen to B. when the time comes, soon or late, for him to play out his last adventure. I know now whether he will or whether he won't reach Khurdisan. It will be unravelled the last time he ever sees print, in a piece which I think will be called The Battle For the World.

What is Brak? Well, he is referred to, by me, as 'the barbarian,' which he is, by an accident of birth and upbringing. As I get to know him, though, I discover he has learned a great deal on his own peculiar sort of Grand Tour.

And I would only point out that it is B.—who has a bit of courage, some simple honor—who is always being addressed as "barbarian" or "outlander" by the villains. There really is no doubting that B. is hopelessly old-fashioned in many ways, and not at home in a world of worldly, affluent princes who are adepts at all sorts of human unkindness, and think nothing of calling on a few monsters in order to get One Up on their neighbors.

I like him, anyway. And there is nothing so pleasant as learning that a given reader is, at least, not indifferent to him."

* * *

Interesting coincidence department: In a small New Jersey town some time ago a car hit a tree. The impact hurled the driver, Miles N. Lucas, out onto the road, where he died. The car, driverless, rolled on into an old cemetery, finally hitting a tombstone. The name on the tombstone: Miles N. Lucas. No relation.

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He could never erase from his memory the evil face of the child of horror . . . the loathsome thing that waited in . . .

the Crib of Hell

By ARTHUR PENDRAGAN

WHAT dark secret had driven Laurence Cullum to the edge of nervous hysteria? What unutterable obligation had forced him to cry out for succor like an agonized madman? These and other questions relevant to the desperate condition of the master of Cullum House perplexed Doctor Nathan Buttrick as he clucked his team homeward through Penaubsket Bridge on the fringe of Sabbathday in northern New England. In other circumstances he might have been dozing, lulled by the cries of the nighthawks aloft and the peace of an upland twilight. But now, although his body craved sleep, his mind was vitally awake.

Doctor Buttrick was baffled by the peculiar malady which made each day a living horror for Cullum. All the sedatives of the 1924 pharmacoepia had failed to quell the anxiety which gnawed at the mind of his patient. In his frustration at the failure of the tablets and injections, the physician had even resorted to folk remedies whispered by black-gummed grandmothers in the hills back from the sea. Infusions of tea and henbane, petals of amaryllis held under the tongue—he had tried all the high-country nostrums which once he held in professional scorn. They were as futile in calming Cullum as the most advanced drugs the age could offer.

As the feeble lights of Sabbathday came into view around the granite mass of Gallowglass Hill, Buttrick reviewed once again the particulars of the case. Laurence Cullum, age 47. Afflicted with a cerebral aneurism,

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a soft patch in a brain artery which might burst tomorrow, in five years, or never. He was the last of the Cullum line, a prominent family begun by Draper Cullum, the leader of the 1706 expedition which struck northward from Dunstable to find, on an August Sunday, the protected harbor on the North Atlantic around which would grow the seacoast town of Sabbathday.

The Cullums had always been influential in the town, yet oddly retiring. Laurence was the most hermitic of the lot. Since the death of his sister Emma and the diagnosis of his aneurism, he had shut himself up in the gray New England Gothic mansion at the end of Windham Road. His controlling hand was still felt on many of the town's business affairs, but this was merely the ghost of the man. His physical presence was sequestered behind the grotesque archway of Cullum House—two enormous jawbones of a sperm whale, erected during the tenancy of the last patriarch, Captain Hugh.

These facts and the few pleasantries that Buttrick had exchanged with Cullum during the man's infrequent visits to town were all that the doctor knew of the Cullum heir before treatments for the aneurism began. Except for the grim scene on the night of Emma's death two years before. The physician had been in attendance, accompanied by Cullum and most of the household staff. Buttrick would never forget the last words of Emma, spoken as she clutched her brothers arm in a white-knuckled hand.

"Laurence, you will keep—*the guardianship*?"

"I—I shall, my dear," Cullum replied as a mad, trapped look appeared in his eyes. Then the life of the frail spinster eked out its last heartbeat, and Buttrick's usefulness had ended.

THE doctor heard nothing of Laurence Cullum for a year and a half after his sister's demise. Then came the midnight telephone call. Buttrick rolled groggily from his bed, expecting a summons to the side of any one of three wives who were awaiting childbirth. Instead, he was shocked into full awareness by an almost hysterical voice begging him to administer relief. Although years of medical practice had somewhat jaded his sensibility to human pain, Buttrick heard a voice so filled with a frantic tension that the listener himself became afraid in an unconscious resonance with the pleading tones. He whipped his team across the surly Penaubsket River and along Windham Road, guided only by the chill light of a three-quarter moon. At the end of the headlong ride he

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found Cullum in a state of extreme anxiety within the mouldering drawing room of the mansion. The earpiece of the telephone was still off its hook as the man cowered in a great wing chair, whimpering like an injured child in shocking contrast to the manliness of his six-foot frame. Although he was wrapped in a dressing gown, Cullum's trouser cuffs bore traces of drying mud.

Buttrick quickly administered the standard dosage of a sedative. It had no effect. A second injection calmed Cullum, or rather removed the physical manifestations of his hysteria. But even as the drug subdued his trembling, Cullum retained a spark of horror in his eyes.

Repeatedly Buttrick questioned the sufferer about the cause of his alarming discomposure. And each time the gaunt-faced Cullum had burrowed deeper into the plush of the wing chair, mumbling under the sedation, "Can't say—mustn't say. No one must ever know. *The guardianship!*" Despite himself the physician felt a growing fear at the recurrence of that ominous term first uttered in his hearing by the dying lips of Emma Cullum.

At last the opiate calmed the man's chaotic nerves. With the aid of Amadee, an aged Acadian man-servant, the doctor wrestled the drugged weight onto a settee near the fire. He left a vial of tablets with the servant, and the assurance that he would visit his master on the next day. Then Buttrick returned to town exhausted physically but unable to quell the incessant questioning of his curiosity. What event or obsession could explain the mental disintegration of Cullum? What arcane significance had that curious term muttered by Laurence even in his narcotic stupor?

During the months of treatment which followed the first nighttime summons, the doctor had learned little else about the trouble at Cullum House. He had diagnosed the aneurism, but was certain that his patient's extreme nervousness and loss of weight were by no means related to his physical affliction. Rather there was some obligation, burden, perhaps something in the house itself, under whose presence the mind of the Cullum heir was slowly crumbling.

Besides the strange term spoken by both Emma and Laurence, there was one other fact which increased the peculiarity of the case. Buttrick had noticed that Cullum always avoided approaching a large tapestry hanging in the drawing room, another remnant of the patriarchy of Captain Hugh. The subject and rendition were unsettling at first glance—

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a highly realistic depiction of a Witches' Sabbath. The naked bodies of cabalistic women were ruddy in the glow from a fire which also illumined a bleeding victim. After a few visits, Buttrick had inured himself to the grisly scene. But Cullum would never pass within five feet of the cloth. Sometimes the doctor had the uncomfortable conviction that his patient was *listening* to the tapestry, as though hearing the whickering laughter of the coven.

Gradually Buttrick resigned himself to the frustration of trying to quell a malady of the spirit by chemical means. A difficult task, at best. With such a secretive, uncooperative patient, it was almost an impossibility.

Such were the reflections of the toil-worn leech of Sabbath-day as he reined his team before the weathered frame bungalow from which his father had practiced before him. After stabling the horses he ate a light supper, then willingly gave himself to his mattress with a sighed hope that no major illnesses or accidents would befall the populace of the village that night. His last conscious thought was not a prayer to his Creator, but a mindless repetition of the eldritch phrase so full of puzzlement and, in Emma's tones, a taint of evil: "The guardianship."

IN late afternoon of the following day Buttrick stood beneath the whale-jaw archway of Cullum House, marvelling at the curving bone monoliths of this striking manifestation of the family's eccentricity. It was one of the two days of the week on which Cullum was treated both for his aneurism and for the frenzy attacking his nerves. Amadee was waiting behind the door. He ushered the doctor into the dank coolness of the mansion. Once inside the entry-way, the aged Acadian drew close to Buttrick and seized his elbow in a surprisingly strong grip, a liberty he had never before taken.

"*M'sieur le docteur,*" he said hoarsely, "do not be surprise' if the master, he tell to you some strange thing' today." There was a smile on the seamed lips, but the coldness of Amadee's eyes removed all traces of amiability from his manner. "It is some time now that the master, he has been saying strange thing' that you should not believe. *C'est la maladie*—it is the sickness, nothing more."

Buttrick was repelled by the servant's familiarity. During his visits to the house he had found Amadee a strange figure, given to eavesdropping impassively as Cullum made pitiful attempts at conversation with his physician. For some inexplicable reason, the presence of the Acadian always

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put Buttrick on his guard as though the stooped valet carried with him a hint of evil. Certainly the man added to the foreboding gloom of Cullum House.

Buttrick pried his arm out of Amadee's grip and strode quickly into the drawing room. As was his habit, Cullum was seated as far away from the tapestry as was physically possible. He rose unsteadily as the doctor entered the room.

"So—so good of you to come, Nathan," he said. Although his mind was on the verge of splintering into a thousand shards of madness, automatically the heir preserved the vestiges of a courtesy reserved for calmer spirits.

Buttrick placed his bag on a richly damasked ottoman, inspecting his patient's appearance with a quick, professional glance. He was appalled by Cullum's decline since the last visit. The man was wrapped in a crimson sitting-robe that seemed made for a larger frame, so grievously had his body wasted under the bearing of his mental burden. The eyes were preternaturally bright, staring from dark sockets. Cullum nervously plucked at the cord of the gown with a hand which shocked Buttrick by its resemblance to Emma's—blanched, and with yellowed nails. The doctor had seen patients harboring within them vile malignancies fall into such decay. But Cullum's dissolution was the result of a *mental* cancer which threatened to destroy both mind and body. It was moot which—soul or flesh—would perish first.

Now the man seemed inflamed by a strange eagerness. He motioned Buttrick to close his bag, and cleared his throat nervously.

"I fear, Nathan, that I have not been the best of patients. All your medications, all your attentions—useless." He dismissed them with a wave of his blue-veined hand. "Nothing will relieve me. Nothing can ease the weight of this hideous charge I labor under . . ." Cullum stopped briefly and seemed to listen to the tapestry. Recovering his train of thought, he continued. "Unless—unless I somehow ease my mind of this *guardianship*!" He spat the word out in mingled tones of fear and loathing.

"Unless I tell the secret I shall die, and the secret shall die with me. And if I tell the secret, the secret shall die, and I shall die with it. Almost a conundrum, eh Buttrick? A true gnomic riddle, eh my friend?"

THE physician rose to steady Cullum, for his speech was assuming the peculiar cadence of madness. The man rallied, mumbling "Not yet—not yet." In a moment his face took on a grave cast as he spoke in cooler, more ominous tones.

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"You must have suspected, Nathan, that the cause of my agony was exceedingly strange. The aneurism," he tapped his temple, "it is nothing. We Cullums have suffered more unusual maladies than that. My trouble lies deeper than the fragile flesh." The heir paused reflectively, then continued. "I—I have stood it as long as I could, endured under this hideous burden longer than I thought possible. I am not as strong as Emma was. Not so much of a Cullum, perhaps. She was like my father, Captain Hugh, amazingly strong-willed. The secret of our family *horror*—I know no other name for it—was safe with her while she lived. But I—two years, man! Two years of ceaseless anxiety. And the last few months have been a waking terror!"

Buttrick had been engrossed by Cullum's narration. But suddenly he started. A sound, a muffled moan or cry, had issued from the direction of the cabalistic tapestry. Cullum saw the doctor's apprehensive glance.

"Not yet, my friend. Later you shall know all. For now, Nathan, hear me out." He flicked his hand at Amadee, who was loitering in the door of the drawing-room. "That will be all, Amadee. Go to your duties." The Acadian shuffled reluctantly into the bowels of the house. When his footsteps no longer sounded off the flaking walls of the passage, Cullum resumed his monologue.

"It is now time, Nathan, that you knew the well-kept secret of this house, for I shall tell you or die in the attempt. Only by sharing this intolerable weight have I any chance of keeping my sanity." His lips trembled as he fought to maintain calmness. "It is n-not easy to disburden onesself of such knowledge, but I must, despite the warning, or I shall most surely go mad. Be patient, Nathan, and let me tell it in my own way."

Buttrick settled uneasily into a sofa. For a moment he felt a sudden impulse to deny Cullum the opportunity to tell his tale. Why should he, Nathan Buttrick, participate in this secret? His precinct was the body, not the diseased mind. With its austere inhabitants and wild setting between the forest wastes and the sullen North Atlantic, Sabbath-day was eerie enough without compounding it by a knowledge of the secret of Cullum House.

But gradually Buttrick's professional instincts exerted themselves. If Cullum did not gain some mental relief, either the torments he underwent would render him mad, or his aneurism would burst under the strain. The doctor settled back and accepted a dark sherry from his patient's trembling hand.

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"Nathan," said Cullum, "have you ever heard the name—*Ligea*?"

"Ligea was the . . . second wife, I believe, of your father Captain Hugh," answered Buttrick.

"Yes, if she can be called—a wife!"

Immediately Buttrick knew the reason for Cullum's bitter statement. The doctor had been only a child when Ligea came to Sabbathday, yet the bizarre tales the townspeople told about her were preserved in his memory. After the death of his first wife, the mother of Laurence and Emma, Captain Hugh Cullum had consigned his children to the care of a relative. He then embarked on his last voyage as master of the steamer *Ogunquit* to the Baltic port of Riga. When he returned to Sabbathday almost two years later, he brought with him the numerous spoils of Yankee trading and a mistress for Cullum House, the dark Ligea.

GROTESQUE rumors about this woman soon sprang up amidst the villagers. Perhaps some originated in the mouths of goodwives who envied her exotic charms. For Ligea was oddly beautiful—a tall woman, with a luminous Eastern complexion, sinuous in her movements, heavily accented in her speech. Ligea's most distinctive feature was her long raven hair of a black deeper than the northern forest night.

Whatever their origin, the stories about Ligea soon were the common coin of conversation around the hearths of Sabbathday. It was said that she had brought the nighthawks to Cullum House. Before her coming, these nocturnal flyers had soared only over the backlands far from town. Now they roosted in the trees of the estate, trembling the night air with the beat of wings.

More serious, some reported that Ligea had been seen on Walpurgis Night wantoning naked through the woods at the fringe of town. One individual who had been abroad at that hour swore that a glowing cloud had passed in from the sea over Sabbathday, and that voices could be heard mumbling in strange tongues from within the floating mass. An ancient dame who dwelt alone near Gallowglass Hill averred that Ligea had spent many afternoons with the few Indian *sachems* still alive, the degenerate remainder of the Pequot tribe. This nearly-extinct race, it was said, held powers over air and sea.

The more intelligent of the townsfolk dismissed these tales as fantasies. Yet all knew that Ligea exerted a strange hold on Captain Hugh. The gruff skipper was quite deferential to her in

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public, a far cry from his callous treatment of his first wife. There were some who even noticed more than a touch of fear in his attitude toward the tall woman whom he bore on his arm.

However, in her public behavior the woman was impeccable—haughty of mien, knowledgeable in the social graces, distant yet polite. During the couples' visits to town she comported herself as befitted the wife of a monied landowner. Only a few noted that occasionally she exchanged knowing glances with the most depraved of the town's moral outcasts.

A year after her arrival in Sabbathday Ligea was big with child. At this time Hugh Cullum ceased his frequent visits to town and seemed to enter retirement at the end of Windham Road. The village believed that he had secluded himself in deference to his wife's condition. Not a soul understood that behind the captain's bluff facade lay a spirit sorely harried by some knowledge which he could impart to no other person.

Several days after her confinement was due to end the news reached Sabbathday that both Ligea and her babe had perished in childbed. The father of Nathan Buttrick had been in attendance. In answer to the many queries he replied that there was nothing he could have done, and divulged no other details of the tragedy. Nathan recalled that his father had been unusually silent for days after the event, as though meditating on some incomprehensible problem. Once he had told his son that if he aspired to be a physician, there was something about the Cullums that he should know in the future. But then the normal course of town life was resumed. The remains of Ligea were cremated and transported to her native land as she had wished. The small casket of the child took its place among the Cullum ancestors in the family crypt. And Nathan Buttrick never heard the Cullum secret from the lips of his father, for the man died of a heart seizure a few months later.

"She was a *witch*, damn her eyes!" cried Cullum. The heir had become noticeably less calm toward the end of Buttrick's narration of the few facts he knew of Ligea. Now a torrent of suppression emotion broke forth. "And *it* is not dead, do you hear? *Not dead*!"

BUTTRICK leapt to restrain Cullum, who seemed ready to run from the room. At the same moment a hideous clamor issued from the direction of the tapestry, a scarcely human screeching accompanied by thudding impacts as though a body were hurling itself at the wall.

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"It heard—it heard!" raved Cullum. He swung around and faced the cloth. "You cannot hold me in bondage any longer. The guardianship is at an end! At last, an end. . . ." His final words choked off in a sob. Cullum pitched into a faint on the settee.

The vicious sounds from the tapestry grew in intensity until the cloth and the wall behind it trembled. Amadee entered the room on the run, his features contorted with rage. Apparently he had overheard the entire scene.

"The weak pig," he snarled, "he has doom' us all—we are dead men, *M'sieur*, dead men!" He vanished down the hall, his footsteps giving way to the grind of a heavy door being swung on its hinges. In a few moments Buttrick heard the crack of a bullwhip over the horrid ululations. A note of pain entered the screams. They tapered off into piteous whimpers, until silence returned to Cullum House.

Buttrick knelt beside the heir, struggling to revive him. For a moment he feared the aneurism had burst. But the eyelids trembled, and slowly the man regained his senses.

"Ah, the relief, Nathan," Cullum sighed. "No longer a prisoner in my own house. No longer keeper of the vile heritage Emma passed on to me."

"Great God, Laurence," cried Buttrick, "what have you hidden behind that wall?"

"I could not describe it," he answered. "Walk to the tapestry. You shall see it for yourself."

Buttrick moved unsteadily toward the rich cloth, his breathing suspended in anticipation of whatever was to occur.

"Open the tapestry with the cord by your hand," directed Callum.

The doctor grasped the weighted end of the cord. He closed his eyes for a moment, opened them, then tugged at the cord. The tapestry slid back smoothly across the wall. Beneath it, the wall was discolored but blank, except for a small glassed orifice at eye level. Buttrick hesitated. He glanced at Laurence, who feebly motioned to him from the settee, then fixed his eye to the peephole. A low moan escaped the physician's lips as his hand came up to clutch his throat.

The orifice gave a view through the thick wall into a smaller chamber behind the drawing room. Immediately opposite was a heavy steel door, with a similar peephole and a sturdy grating at the bottom through which a man might crawl, were it open. Gnawed bones and a basin of water lay before the grill, which was apparently an opening for inserting food into the chamber. A grayish light emanated from

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tiny clerestory windows along two sides beneath the ceiling. Knots of thread-like filaments—black, brown, and yellow—littered the floor.

Crouched in the far corner was the tenant of this chamber, a spectre so inhuman that Buttrick's vision momentarily blurred from the shock. It hulked panting on its hands, a living human torso, if such a distortion of man's form can be designated thusly. Raven hair fell in hanks and tangles from a misshapen skull. Bright, feverish eyes glared out from beneath the shaggy brows. From the face projected only a rudimentary nose, its nostrils dilating as an animal would breathe. The lips were tensed in a snarl, revealing discolored teeth more like the fangs of a carnivore.

THE thing was naked save for a ragged breechclout tied about its middle. The torso showed superhuman muscular development—arms as thick as fenceposts, a barrel chest partly covered by a pelt. The lower extremities were piteously withered, dragging behind the upper body. Yet that monstrous form carried itself to and fro in the chamber with remarkable agility, supporting its weight on the arms and talon-like hands. As it lunged from one corner to the other, the creature sounded an ominous murmur from deep within its dark breast.

"Oh my dear God," whispered Buttrick, unbelieving before the grisly sight. He had seen men mangled by awful accidents in the logging camps, and even the pitiable distortions of infant bodies in stillbirths. But never had the physician's entire consciousness writhed before such a gross malformation of the human body. He slumped weakly against the wall beside the peephole.

"What is it, Laurence?" he asked. "Where—where did it come from?"

"Now you realize the desperate burden I have carried these months, Nathan," replied Cullum. "That *thing* has been in our charge since the death of my father's second wife. It is—Ligea's *Hell-Child*!"

As he watched Buttrick's reaction to the spectacle behind the tapestry, a transformation overcame Cullum. He seemed more in control of himself as though the sharing of the secret with another not in the blood line had relieved a great pressure within his spirit. Seeing Buttrick's revulsion, Cullum had the presence of mind to fill another glass from the squat ship's decanter and offer the stimulant to the doctor, who had moved slowly away from the wall like a sleepwalker.

"Sit down, Nathan, and calm yourself," ordered the heir. "I'm

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sure you must have many questions about our—bad seed."

When Buttrick had composed himself, Cullum spoke volubly about the origin of the chamber-dweller. The doctor listened as his host told him of Ligea's dying threat to the house of Cullum. Unless they maintained her infant in secrecy until its maturity, they would perish. *The guardianship*, as she called it, must be passed from member to member. Only death could release a guardian, who was responsible for the care and nourishment of the creature. They would know, Ligea said, when the child no longer needed their protection.

Captain Hugh Cullum had always scoffed at superstitions and curses. But suddenly the occult had come under his own eaves in the presence of that incredible child, surrounded by a brooding evil even then in its infancy. He knew that he had not fathered such a monster. Gradually the conviction grew within his mind that Ligea had consorted with a spirit of darkness, and that the babe was the token of their devilish love.

Captain Hugh would allow the child no baptism. It was placed in the strong-room behind the main parlor, a chamber which the guardians came to call, sardonically, *The Crib*. From that time forward, the tenant of that dark room behind the tapestry was known as *The Hell-Child*.

"And so, Nathan, if Ligea's words were true, then you are listening to a dead man. The guardian who betrays the secret must die, you know."

"Superstitious nonsense!" cried Buttrick, who had recovered from his initial shock. "Why, look at you, man. You're more relaxed than I've seen you in months. Now, Laurence, I can't yet explain that thing in there, or why it's survived so long despite its grave malformation. But it must have a natural explanation. I admit that at first I was shocked. It's a hideous thing. Yet I can see nothing that you should fear in it. Perhaps we can arrange for an institution to take over its care, relieving you of the burden. As to its being a Hell-Child—really, Laurence, I'd expect this type of thinking more of an upland farmer than the Cullum heir."

"That is because you do not fully understand the terrible threat of the creature!" cried Cullum. "It must be destroyed, Nathan, before it can commit more of its evil. It's just begun, I tell you!"

BUTTRICK put out his hand to steady Cullum, who was becoming agitated again. "What evil? What are you talking about, Laurence?"

"Do you remember that first

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night I called you—how frantic I was?" The doctor nodded. "And do you remember Rupel Oldham?"

Buttrick involuntarily winced. Oldham had been found lying in a foot of stagnant water near a fire-road through Mohegan Swamp. Buttrick had signed the death-certificate of the aged muskrat trapper. The body had been badly mutilated, and a look of utter horror was indelibly stamped on the face.

"You don't mean—that?" asked Buttrick, pointing toward the wall.

"Cullum nodded. "It broke out," he said helplessly. "We had underestimated its strength, and it burst through the wooden door which the steel door you saw later replaced. Amadee and I followed it as quickly as we could. It was dark. The spring rains had muddied the ground." Cullum's voice became dreamy as he relived the gruesome event.

"At first Amadee and I didn't know where to look. We stood in the drive, he with the bullwhip and myself carrying the lantern. It could have gone off in any direction. But then—then we heard the nighthawks crying over Mohegan Swamp in the valley behind the estate. A terrible, fierce sound, Laurence. They were swarming and diving as though mad."

"We ran through the forest on the fire-road. The sound of the birds got louder, more shrill, until we could see against the gray sky the place over which they were swarming. I remember wishing that I had had the presence of mind to bring a pistol. But then the light from the lantern showed us its form ahead. Oh Nathan, Oldham had come down to check his traps, and it caught him there in the mud and scummy water. When we ran up it was—*feeding*!"

"Amadee lashed it with the whip, and it drew back. I saw that we could do nothing for Oldham. The expression on his face—terrible. Between the two of us we drove the creature back to the house and into The Crib. It was more docile then, feared the bite of the whip more than now." Cullum paused and wet his lips with the sherry. "But the atrocity so unsettled me that I had to call you for relief, or I would have lost my mind."

"We should have recognized this murderous act as an unmistakeable sign that it was approaching its maturity, Nathan. But we thought the killing of Oldham was an accident, a chance encounter. No more than a month later, Arnold, my groundskeeper, passed away. He was the last of the servants, save Amadee. At night the beast broke out again. I was awakened by the nighthawks massing over the

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house. The coffin lay within the parlor. That thing had overturned it, and was tearing, slashing . . ." Cullum clenched his fists in agony. "Do you understand what I've been living with, Nathan? Do you wonder that my nerves are gone?"

BUTTRICK stirred uncomfortably. He was being drawn into the macabre web of Cullum's narration. The doctor began to feel unsafe sitting only a few yards away from the tapestry. How many times had he entered the decaying drawing-room to treat the master of Cullum House, oblivious to the existence of a horror separated from him by only a few inches of plaster and lath?

"We then knew," continued Cullum, "that its ghastly appetite had been whetted. We realized that these events were not mere chance. The evil thing mothered by my father's second wife—I cannot call her my stepmother—had reached its maturity. For a week after we interred Arnold it screamed. I shall hear its cries until my ears are stopped by death. Ravenous, ferocious howls which sounded even beyond the walls of the house. Amadee and his bullwhip could not control it. I stuffed my ears with cotton, took laudanum, drank myself into unconsciousness—everything failed. That hideous keening could not be suppressed. It was then, at the end of my wits, that I made the decision for which, if ever a man were damned, I shall be. I had to stop the screaming, Nathan, do you understand that?"

Buttrick shook his head slowly, scarce daring to consider what awful revelation he would hear next.

"I ordered Amadee—ah, even now I cannot bring myself to pronounce the words!" Cullum fought visibly to control his rising emotion. He sprang from the settee and paced the room. "Amadee, in addition to being my only servant, is also," he blurted the words out, "custodian of the Sabbathday Burial Ground. Do you understand my meaning?"

"Then the bones in the chamber, and those fibers—hanks of hair?" Buttrick asked incredulously.

"How many evenings have I slumped in that very chair, listening to that beast at its unholy supper! How often have I considered suicide, anything to free me of this vile guardianship. Even Amadee has become infected by it—I truly believe he enjoys tending the creature and disciplining it with his bullwhip. He derives a sense of power from those duties. The old man thinks me weak and scorns me because my nerves cannot stand the strain. But what a burden—God help me, I

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am the protector of a *ghoul*!"

A long silence followed the impassioned confession. The room had become oppressively thick-atmosphered. Buttrick opened the French doors which led to a terrace and thence the drive. The sky was yet aglow, and only the drone of frogs at Mohegan Swamp heralded the approach of night. The birds roosting in the trees about the house had not yet begun their darkling flights.

The doctor turned and addressed Cullum. "Is there any danger that it will break out again, Laurence?"

"The steel door has thus far resisted its attempts," he replied. "Occasionally it hurls itself at the door for an hour at a time. Its ferocity is appalling. But the door and its frame remain fast." The heir sighed deeply. "Yet a mere steel door cannot be sufficient to hold such a malignant evil. It must be destroyed, Nathan, and quickly. I can no longer protect the town from its appetite. And now that I have discovered the Cullum secret to you, I feel that if we do not act soon the thing will be at large, with no one to stop it. For it heard me betray it, I am sure, and craves my death."

Buttrick was convinced. Now his mind no longer operated in accord with the civilized virtues of reason and mercy. His own experience that day at Cullum House, and his host's desperate words, had brought to life within him the savage's fear of the unknown. He agreed to assist in the extermination of the creature, and swore that no word of the proceedings would ever pass his lips.

Since Cullum assured him that he could spend another night in the house with the Hell-Child, Buttrick decided to return to Sabbathday. On the morrow he would return to the estate to plan the destruction and interment of the beast, for they would need daylight to dig its unholy resting place.

On the portico of the mansion beneath the arched jaw-bones, Cullum seized Buttrick's hand in a firm grip. "I only wish my father had taken this course in the beginning," he said. "Then perhaps he, Emma, and myself would have been spared the blight which has sapped our lives." He ran his hand along the cool ivory of the curving white monoliths. "I know that wherever he is, my father approves the action we must take."

Buttrick nodded in silent agreement. He bade the heir a good night, and turned his team onto the darkness of Windham Road. As he left the grounds of the estate, the nighthawks were beginning their evening clamor. Their rasping cries banished the peace of the autumn evening.

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AFTER his return to the bungalow the doctor lay sleepless, distracted by vivid mental phantasms of what he had heard and witnessed that evening. Each time he closed his eyes the scene in The Crib flashed across the screen of his conscious mind in all its loathsome detail. He could not erase from his memory the glowering countenance of the Hell-Child, a face so evil it seemed impossible that flesh and bone could be tortured into receiving the stamp of such malignancy. Buttrick could well understand why Captain Hugh had disclaimed parentage of the child.

And now Buttrick himself had been drawn into the Cullum horror. He had sworn to aid in the destruction of a thing which might still bear within it a spark of humanity, despite Cullum's heated denials and the mystery of its parentage. Vicious, instinctively homicidal, yes; but was this enough, he asked himself, enough cause to betray a greater oath—that one which bound Nathan Buttrick to use his skills only for the preservation of life? It was a quandary, and the man writhed under the weight of his contradictory obligations.

The doctor had thus lain staring at the slowly rising patch of moonlight on his wall for three hours, when the telephone beside his bed rang. With a sudden clairvoyance Buttrick knew that this was no ordinary call summoning him to the sickbed of a villager. He swung out of the bed and snatched the earpiece from the hook. The voice of Laurence Cullum dinned in his ear.

"Nathan, come quickly, man. We can't hold it. It's breaking out of The Crib!"

Over Cullum's voice came the sound of splintering wood and a ravening ululation such as never sprang from human throat. The telephone crashed to the floor as Buttrick leapt to struggle into his clothes. He vaulted across the yard to the barn, scarce feeling the bite of the early hoarfrost. With frantic speed he harnessed the team and urged them out of their warm quarters into the chill darkness of the road where the moon hardly penetrated the roof of overhanging trees.

Five minutes after the call, the wild-eyed horses lunged through the shadows of Penaubsket Bridge onto the gravel of Windham Road. Although the doctor was a good master to his animals, now he whipped them cruelly. He called the two mares by name, hurling imprecations foreign to his lips in an effort to gain more speed. Black masses of maple and oak lashed by, their sharp twigends striking blood from Buttrick's face when the surrey veered too close to the road's edge. Twice it seemed that all—horses, surrey, and driver—must

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surely fall to perdition, so headlong was their flight in rounding curves where granite outcroppings changed the road's direction. If a goodman of the town had been abroad at that hour, he would have crossed himself in utter terror at the approach of the flying team and whipman.

It seemed an age to Buttrick, but at last the lights of Cullum House glimmered through the thickets ahead. At the stone pillars which marked the entrance to the estate the horses shied, nearly throwing the doctor from his seat. The whip cracked once, twice, but they would not enter. The team stood ready to bolt in the face of a terror which their senses could detect even at that far remove.

CURSING, Buttrick leapt down from the surrey and made for the house afoot. The rains of early autumn had washed innumerable gullies into the clay of the drive. Several times he stumbled, almost twisting an ankle beneath him. Over the sound of his labored breathing came a confusion of high-pitched cries. The nighthawks were swarming above the house in a dense cloud. Their mass eclipsed the light of the moon as they climbed to an apogee, plummeted suicidally toward the ground, then arced upwards. All about him the doctor heard the beat of their wings.

Nearing the great house Buttrick saw that the French doors which he had opened in another world, it seemed, were still ajar. The parlor within was lighted. Sobbing from his exertions he lurched onto the terrace and leaned against the door frame. "Laurence," he cried. "Laurence, where are you?"

The doctor's gaze slowly swept the room. The ottoman on which he had set his bag that afternoon lay on its side, the stuffing exposed through a long rent in the fabric. On the far wall the tapestry hung in folds from one of its corners. Beneath, the discolored area of the wall framed a gaping hole partially obstructed with shards of plaster and fang-like laths. By main force, the captive behind that wall had clawed and butted its way out of the Crib.

Buttrick stepped into the room, aghast at the wreckage of the once-sumptuous chamber. From behind an overturned sofa a moan broke the stillness, more like a sigh than an expression of pain. Cullum lay crumpled against the wall, hurled there by the inhuman force of the thing as it rushed from its confinement.

"Laurence! Are you all right, man?" cried the physician. There was a deep gash on Cullum's brow.

"See—see to Amadee. In the hall. I—I'm afraid it caught him, Nathan."

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Buttrick found the Acadian halfway down the hallway which lead to the steel door of the Crib. The Hell-Child had seized him at his middle, and dashed him fatally against the floor. Beside the dead servant lay the bullwhip, a puny weapon against a force of such unutterable malevolence.

The doctor returned quickly to attend Cullum. The shock of the events could prove dangerous to the aneurism. The weak spot of the brain artery might rupture from the slightest stress. But the heir indicated dazedly that he was unharmed except for the head wound.

"It went outside," whispered Cullum. "I could hear it scrabbling about on the portico before you came. Thank God it's stopped screaming. I could not bear that sound another minute."

"Are there any firearms in the house?" asked Buttrick.

"Only an ancient pistol which failed me." Cullum pointed to an old handgun lying at the middle of the floor. "I tried to fire at it as it came through the wall, but the mechanism was rusty from age. The beast flicked me off like a doll and went for Amadee, perhaps because he took so much pleasure in whipping it. But it will return to finish me, Nathan, because it has now matured, and needs its guardian no longer." Cullum smiled weakly as a wistful expression fixed itself upon his pallid face. "If death is the price of freedom from that child of the Pit, then I shall pay it gladly," he said.

BUTTRICK suddenly stiffened. Somewhere beyond the open doors of the entry-way he heard the sound of deep, animal respirations. A growl loosed itself from a savage throat.

"I must close and bar those doors," the doctor muttered to himself, for Cullum had lapsed into an almost trance-like state. He grasped a heavy poker and walked carefully through the hall. "If it comes at me," he thought, "I must slash at the eyes. The eyes."

The main doors of the house stood thrown open to the night. Although it now rode the treetops, the moon illumined the steps up which Buttrick would have raced had he not entered through the French doors. The cries of the ominous birds had ceased. They roosted in the elms and oaks, as though awaiting a climactic event.

The doctor peered out onto the lawn, keeping well within the shadows of the entry-way. Nothing stirred. He stepped into the doorframe and quickly scanned right and left. Again there was only the wash of moonlight on the lawn and long-deserted walks. No sound was audible except an occasional chirrup from the trees.

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Buttrick exhaled slowly. It seemed that the thing had run off, perhaps to Mohegan Swamp where it had claimed its first victim. This was work for a search party in the morning, not for a middle-aged physician unarmed except for a poker.

Wiping his brow against his sleeve, Buttrick stepped onto the portico beneath the massive jawbones. The moon caught the whiteness of the eccentric archway. He ran his palm along the ivory smoothness, grateful for a touch of cool solidity. Standing there for a moment, the man seemed to gain strength from the contact of his hand with the curving pillars of bone. On the steps of the mansion he took a final surveying glance over the grounds, unwilling to stray farther from the light. All was quiet. "We will run the beast to earth in the bogs come sunup;" he thought. "Surely it cannot escape us there."

Suddenly the trees at the edge of the estate swayed at their tops as the nighthawks again winged aloft. The doctor's calmness left him. He started up the steps to regain the relative security of the house. But as he mounted the last step his eyes caught a dark mass hulking at the very top of the arch where the whalebones intersected. At the same moment a guttural cry which seemed to tremble the entire portico pealed down at him. Buttrick's head snapped up. On the peak of the arch, balanced on its claw-like hands, crouched the Hell-Child! Its long, snarled hair cascaded down over the joint where the tops of the bones were clamped together. The fantastically developed shoulder and arm muscles knotted as the creature prepared to hurl itself downward upon Buttrick.

In the split-second it took his arm to bring the poker up, he realized that the thing had expected him to enter through the main door when he arrived in answer to Cullum's call for help. It had climbed to the top of the arch, hidden there by the shadow of the eaves, in order to fall upon him as he entered the house. Then all thought ceased for Nathan Buttrick as he saw the macabre figure let go the top of the arch and launch itself at him with a bellow.

THE poker flashed sideways in a vicious arc, aimed at the point in space where the eyes should have been at that moment. But it smote the empty air. For as Buttrick began his stroke the long, raven hair of the beast caught in the ironwork which braced the top of Hugh Cullum's arch. The momentum of its lunge carried the Hell-Child clear of the ivory columns. It plummeted downward for the merest frac-

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tion of a heartbeat—then a terrible jerk ceased its plunge. It swung between the columns like a grotesque marionette, hanging by its own matted hair.

The doctor could not breathe as he gaped at the frantic contortions of the creature. The cruel arms flailed and beat the air as it struggled to haul itself back to the top of the arch. From that brutish throat came a scream of incredible fury. The face grimaced from pain and rage. Flecks of foam spotted the snarling lips. For a moment it seemed that the hair surely must part, unable to support such a weight. But then a report like a muffled gunshot stilled the writhing of that hideous form. Its neck broken, the Hell-Child hung limply above the steps of the house it had terrorized through the long decades.

Unstrung by the terrible self-execution he had witnessed. Buttrick fell to his knees on the floor of the portico. For minutes he sagged there, his fingers still gripping the haft of the useless poker. The trembling which shook his entire frame gradually subsided. Suddenly remembering the wounded heir who lay inside, he roused himself and entered the house.

Cullum was sitting as before, propped against the wall. His face was ashen, but his eyes glimmered with surprise as Buttrick knelt beside him. "You—you are alive, Nathan!" he whispered. "Does the beast still live?"

The doctor quickly related the grisly death of the Hell-Child. It was apparent to him that his friend was falling into a decline from which he would never recover. The aneurism had been fatally disturbed by the night's events.

"Then I am afree!" cried Cullum. "At long last free of that terrible presence. Ah, liberty. Blessed, blessed liberty . . ." The voice of the heir trailed off in a final sob. Buttrick gently placed a pillow beneath the still head, and closed the eyes. The master of Cullum House, the last guardian of the Hell-Child, was dead.

FOR a long time the physician stood in the shambles of the parlor, trying to fathom some meaning in what he had experienced. Two corpses lay in that silent mansion. Beneath the whale-jaw archway hung the carcass of the family's child of darkness, claimed by this architectural whim of its first guardian. The grim sequence of events was too unsettling to comprehend.

But now it was time for action. Impelled by some allegiance which endured even the death of the last Cullum, the doctor resolved never to divulge the horror in which he had participated. Crawling into the Crib through the broken wall, he cleaned the

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chamber of all traces of the Hell-Child's occupancy. On the portico he cut down the monstrous body and loaded it onto the surrey.

Buttrick inched the surrey down the dark fire road to Mohegan Swamp. In a desolate reach of the bog he interred the remains of the vicious life which had brought Cullum House to ruin. Only then did he call the Sabbathday constable.

The account which that officer received was deliberately intended to excite no undue curiosity. As Buttrick told it, he had received a nighttime call from the heir requesting medication for his condition. Near the end of their conversation the line abruptly went dead. Upon his arrival at the house he found that apparently a burglar of considerable strength had slain Amadee. Cullum had been struck once, as the single gash on his brow testified. The blow had fatally aggravated his aneurism. Foiled by the steel door of the strongroom behind the parlor, the thief and murderer had broken through the wall into the chamber. But he found no treasure, for the room had not been used for years.

No person in Sabbathday, not even the investigating constable, questioned the veracity of the doctor's explanation. Nathan Buttrick hid within himself the memory of that ghastly night at Cullum House until death eased him of the woeful burden.

* * *

Now, residents of the village rarely speak of the Cullum tragedy. Since there were no heirs, the great house reverted to Windham County and was razed for its timbers. In the town cemetery the Cullum family crypt is sealed forever and the Sabbathday Burial Ground is a place of peace, embraced on all sides by the northern forest.

But in Mohegan Swamp, the nighthawks disturb the twilight calm. They have inhabited the lowlands since the pulling down of Cullum House. At sundown, while the main flock wheels and cries over the brackish water, a few night-fliers roost atop a curious mound near the shoulder of a fire-road through the swamp. Each year the mound grows somewhat higher.

The forest warden who first noticed the growth believed it to be merely a subterranean tangle of living willow roots sent out by the trees which overhang the bog. Yet the birds who frequent the hillock utter strange, fervid cries as if urging on the evolution of something within the peculiar pile. It is unlikely that the mound will stir the curiosity of the townsfolk. Whatever phenomenon is at work will reach completion undisturbed. **THE END**

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PLAYMATE

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Long legs, short legs . . . . voice tapes throat, voice tapes childish . . . . problems, problems, always problems, even in the well-run world of Moderan.

IT was on a July Monday that Little Sister was under his window, very early, with a big box in her arms. The vapor cover that day was pink, as indeed it would be for all of July, as set by the Central Vapor Shield Control and the Vapor Light Saving people. The temperature was controlled to a pleasant 70 degrees F. inside and outside, and he, as usual, was working on a formula.

"My little playmate came," she shouted, "my little sister! Come see."

He, plastic-legged and iron-x "replaced," arose from his hip-snuggie chair and went to the edge of his door. "What's the nonsense?" he asked, metal-fogged and weary. "Why aren't you napping? Or behaving with Mox?" Mox was her iron man who looked after her needs like a mother, in the red plastic hut where she lived apart from other folk while awaiting the age of "replacements."

"It's my little companion!" Little Sister shrieked. "I sent for her. She came today, in the mail."

He rubbed his eyes with the backs of his gold-seal hands. He tried to think across the metal fields. A man of Advanced Times, he had submitted to many iron-x, and a few gold-seal, "replacements" since coming up from Olderun, in a move toward durability, in a move to conquer immortality for the corporeal self. But sometimes this metal self, that was fast becoming his main self, dominated the flesh strips

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to such an extent that he found it difficult to force thoughts to track the petty paths of everyday. Across the pathless fields of the high dimensions he was a keen hot hound on the scent of formulae. With what was left of his family, Little Sister, he sometimes found it hard going even to converse on plain terms. "Tell me slowly," he pleaded.

She took a deep breath. Her good full chest swelled in a triumph of flesh and bone. Her brown eyes were sparkle-bright when she said, "I mustn't grow up alone, even if I am the last little girl. As I await the age of 'replacement' I must have a companion, which same just came in the mail, Daddy. And you will put her together, Daddy, so we can play. I have named her already—Little Slots."

Slots was a box full of slotted metal, a few wires, some power wafers, many tapes, a head, various curved pieces of white plastic, certain parts that were almost flesh and the printed sheet of directions. Slots was a pile of junk and a headache confronting a man dedicated to solitude, eternity and calm, companionless thinking on universal deep problems. Slots as she was, unassembled, had cost five hundred thousand dollars cash—by gift certificate from the Organization for the Entertainment of Little Flesh People.

There was a clatter in his joints, of metal scraping on metal and the wincing of the flesh strips, as he knelt to one knee there on the gray bare yard and took up the box that contained Slots. He opened the box and saw a wax-warm face smirking up at him, an enigmatic face that could have been a nine year old girl's face, or a much older girl's face, made of plastic and wreathed in real hair. The mechanical mouth tumbled open and beautifully formed white teeth gleamed out of the rubbery lips. "I'll bite your big feet off if you aren't good to me," the beautiful flirtatious head threatened right away, mechanically and pleasantly enough. Then a clamor started up, "Change the tape, change the tape . . ."

HE jumped like a bucket full of the sun had just come high-boiling down through all those miles, through all the pink vapor shield, to spill on a jot of his flesh. When he jumped, pieces of Slots and the box in which she had been mailed scattered fanwise across the gray yard. But the head sitting smiling in the middle of the scattered pieces had a tape for the situation. "Butterfingery old cold widower and a half-wit moron girl," it said. Then it spent about five minutes bouncing up and down

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on the plastic yard sheet and screaming, "Shame, shame . . . foul, foul . . . save me, save me!" After that the head, very businesslike, rolled about picking up its parts and slotting everything together until a pleasingly tall and slim fair girl of metal and white plastic stood smiling in the cool rose glow of the pink vapor shield of July. "Well, and where's the bogs?" she said as she deftly stooped to tear out the white nylo-wov lining of the box in which she had been mailed. She wrapped the long piece of snowy cloth about her in such a way that it was tastefully full and loose in places and taut across other places to enhance her fine plastic curves. "Always pays to please the bogs," she said.

"The bogs?" said Little Sister, bewildered and still somewhat dazed by the performance she had just seen. "What do you mean, bogs?"

"The oggosite rex. Like the meg for the wogen. —Damn! faulty tape," she said, making a sour face. Then she said with a throaty voice and a new clear tape, "I mean where are the boys? The opposite sex. Like the men for the women. I'm a girl!" She smiled.

"You're to be my little playmate until I'm ready for 'replacements,'" said Little Sister, simply and with a heart full of love for the warm metal and plastic thing towering over her. "I've got ever so many card-wov cut-out dollies. You can have one. And two changes of clothes for her. Today!" Little Sister's face shone beatific from the beautiful gesture and the open-hearted strain of such hard giving. "And I'll let you color a little with my ray spray, if you'll promise, cross your heart, not to bust it."

Slots was coldly eyeing Little Sister, distaste and boredom and pitying amusement in every stare. "Aw go grow up," she said gritty voiced with the tape for the occasion. "I'm here to play with your dad. I think." Little Sister was near to tears.

But Father, eager as ever, he thought, to get the silly diversions over with, get Little Sister back to her place and himself in his hip-snuggie chair for more formula thinking, had been scientifically and purposefully reading the directions, after he had recovered from the initial shock of hearing Slots talk and seeing her put herself together. He remembered that the first of these dolls was at least ten years old now, and the idea for them was much much older, and all this helped him regain his confidence in the all-rightness of things. When he came to the CAUTION part of the instructions, he just slipped over quickly, caught Slots firmly by an arm, took the long

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sections out of her legs and proceeded to secure her range-change to the place calibrated LITTLE - GIRL - PLAYMATE - COMPANION. "We ship them from our factory on BIG-GIRL-LOVEMATE-DIVERSION," the directions stated, "the calibration of widest versatility and greatest demand. But they function quite as well on LITTLE-GIRL - PLAYMATE - COMPANION, if wired to it securely after first being relieved of the long sections of the legs." And Slots, down to Little Sister size now, was busily rewinding her dress to make up for her new status in stature. Then she said, a little dully it seemed with the tape for the occasion, "Let's go play cut-outs. And really, I'd love to use your ray-spray coloring thing, if I may."

SO Little Sister and Little Slots went arm-in-arm off across the gray plastic yard toward Little Sister's red hut, and Father, with the long sections of legs tucked firmly under one arm, hastened fast as he could back to his hip-snuggie chair and his big desk for thinking. But just as he feared might be the case, he found that he was not now thinking clean on universal deep problems. YES! he had this other problem now that would have to be solved before he could get his heart out of the bumps and jumps and back to universal cool-gear smoothness. Oh, why did these things have to happen? Why couldn't Little Sister have just behaved with Mox, her iron man, instead of ordering this silly doll playmate? But Father, like the dogged fighter he had always been, did not dodge the issue; he got right to grips with the problem, even if his heart was not yet quite as smooth and reliable as it should have been. Then too he had to work with a mind that was really not much good now at pertinent flesh-type questions, but he would decide. YES! —Should he order a doll of his own, or just change the legs back and forth on this one when Little Sister was sleeping?

THE END

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THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME

By KEITH LAUMER

Part Two of Three Parts

Synopsis of Part One

Brion Bayard, a former American diplomat, now a colonel in the intelligence service of the Imperium—the supra-national government which rules the Net of alternate worlds opened up by the development in 1896 of the Maxoni-Cocini generator—is summoned late one evening to the office of his old friend Baron von Richthofen, chief of Imperial Intelligence. As armed guards stand by, Richthofen quizzed Bayard closely—on matters of Bayard's personal life and recent activities which are well known to both parties.

Satisfied, Richthofen dismisses the guards, apologizes—but offers no explanation. As Bayard leaves the building, he sees charred footprints in the corridor, follows them to an unused sub-cellar, and there encounters a fantastic, glowing figure, bending over a fallen man. Bayard attacks; long pink sparks jump from the fiery figure to meet him—and a titanic explosion slams him into unconsciousness.

He awakens to find himself alone, the city deserted—except for a lone column of marching creatures: non-human, ape-like figures in coveralls and helmets. He trails them to the Net Garages where the alternate-world-travelling shuttles are housed; discovered, he commandeers an alien shuttle parked among the Imperial machines—and finds himself locked on an automatic course for the aliens' home world.

Arriving in the Hagroon world, he is hauled from the machine, beaten, marched through

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streets thronged with ape-men of a dozen varieties, toiling in harness beside mastodons. He is thrust into a cell—where he finds Dzok, a representative of still another non-human race of Anthropos. Dzok, he learns, is an agent of the Authority, a super-government which, like the Imperium, rules a vast empire of alternate worlds. Only the vastness of the Net—or the Web, as Dzok calls the continuum of parallel universes—has prevented the two powers from meeting in the past.

They escape together, and in a stolen shuttle travel to Dzok's home world, Xonijeel, where, Dzok says, Bayard will doubtless receive help in returning to the Zero-zero world of the Imperium, and in solving the mystery of the deserted capital. He is given a hearing before a Council of Elders—but instead of help, he is condemned to transportation for life to a sub-technical A-line.

CHAPTER VI

I WATCHED the play of sunlight on the set of gauzy curtains at the open window for a long time before I began to think about who owned them. The recollection came hard, like a lesson learned but not used for a while. I had had a breakdown—a nervous collapse, that was it—while on a delicate mission to Louisiana—the details were vague—and now I was resting at a nursing home in Harrow, run by kindly Mrs. Rogers. . . .

I sat up, felt a dizziness that reminded me of the last time I had spend a week flat on my back after a difficult surveillance job in . . . in. . . . I had a momentary half-recollection of a strange city, and many faces, and. . . .

It was gone. I shook my head, lay back. I was here for a rest; a nice, long rest; then, with my pension—a sudden, clear picture of my passbook showing a balance of 10,000 gold Napoleons on deposit at the Banque Credit Londres flashed across my mind—I could settle somewhere and take up gardening, the way I'd always wanted to. . . .

The picture seemed to lack something, but it seemed too much trouble to think about it now. I looked around the room; it was small, cheery with sunlight and bright-painted furniture, with hooked rugs on the floor and a bedspread decorated with a hunting scene that suggested long winter nights tatting by an open fire. The door was narrow, paneled, brown-painted wood, with a bright brass knob. The knob turned and a buxom woman with grey hair, cheeks like apples, a funny little hat made of lace, and a many-

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colored skirt that brushed the floor came in, gave a jump when she saw me, and beamed as though I'd just said she made apple pie like Mother's.

"Mr. Bayard! Ye're awake!" She had a squeaky voice as jolly as the whistle on a peanut stand, with an accent I couldn't quite place.

"And hungry, too, I'm guessing! Ye'd like a lovely bowl of soup, now wouldn't ye, sir? and maybe a dab of pudding after."

"A nice steak smothered in mushrooms sounds better," I said. "And, uh . . ." I had meant to ask her who she was, but then I remembered kindly Mrs. Rogers, of course. . . .

"A glass of wine, if it's available," I finished, and lay back, watching little bright spots dance before me.

"Of course; and a nice hot bath first. That'll be lovely, Mr. Bayard. I'll just call Hilda . . ." Things were a little hazy then for a few minutes; I was vaguely aware of bustlings and the twitter of feminine voices. Hands plucked at me, tugged gently at my arms. I made an effort, got my eyes open, saw the curve of a colored apron over a girlish hip. She was leaning across me, just getting my pajama jacket off. Beyond her, the older woman was directing two husky, blonde males in maneuvering something heavy below my line of sight. The girl straightened, and I caught a glimpse of a slim waist, a nicely rounded bosom and arm, a saucy face under straight-cut hair the color of clover honey. The two men finished and left, the motherly type with them. The girl fussed for a minute, then followed the others, leaving the door open. I got up on one elbow, saw a six-foot-long enamelled bath-tub half full of water placed neatly on the oval rug, a big fluffy towel, a scrub brush, and a square cake of white soap on a small stool beside it. It looked inviting. I sat up, got my legs over the side of the bed, took deep breaths until the dizziness went away, then pulled off the purple silk pajama bottoms and stood, shakily.

"Oh, ye shouldn't try to walk yet, sir!" a warm contralto voice said from the doorway. Honey-hair was back, coming toward me with a concerned look on her pert features. I made a half-hearted grab for my pants, almost fell, sat down heavily on the bed. She was beside me now, with a strong hand under my arm.

"Gunvor and I've been worried about ye, sir. The doctor said ye'd been very sick, but when ye slept all day yesterday . . ."

I wasn't following what she said. It's one thing to wake up in an unfamiliar room and have a little trouble getting oriented;

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it's considerably different to realize that you're among total strangers, and that you have no recollection at all of how you got there. . . .

WITH her assistance, I made the three steps to the tub, hesitated before tackling the climb in.

"Just put your foot in, that's right," the girl was saying. I followed orders, stepped in and sat down, feeling too weak even to wince at the hot water. The girl perched on the stool beside me, tossed her head to get her hair back, reached for my arm.

"I'm Hilda," she said. "I live just along the road. It was exciting when Gunvor phoned and told me about ye'r coming, sir. It isn't often we see a Louisianan here; and a diplomat, too. Ye must lead the most exciting life! I suppose ye've been in Egypt and Austria and Spain—and even in the Seminole Nation." She chattered and sudsed me, as unconcernedly as a grandmother bathing a five year old. What little impulse to resist I may have had faded fast; I was as weak as a five-year old, and it felt good to have this lively creature briskly massaging my back with the brush while the sun shone through the window and the breeze flapped the curtain.

". . . ye're accident, sir?" I realized Hilda had asked a question—an awkward one. I had a powerful reluctance to admit that I had—or appeared to have—some sort of mild amnesia. I hadn't forgotten everything, of course. It was just that the details were hazy. . . .

"Hilda—the man that brought me here—did he tell you anything about me—about the accident . . ?"

"The letter!" Hilda jumped up, went across to a table decorated with red, yellow, blue, and orange painted flowers, brought back a stiff square envelope.

"The doctor left this for ye, sir. I almost forgot!"

I reached for it with a wet hand, got the flap open, pulled out a single sheet of paper on a fancy letterhead formally typed: "Mr. Bayard,

It is with deep regret and expressions of the highest personal regard that I confirm herewith your retirement for disability from the Diplomatic Service of His Imperial Majesty, Napoleon Fifth. . . ."

There was more—all about my faithful service and devotion to duty, regrets that I hadn't recovered in time for a personal send-off, and lots of hopes for a speedy convalescence. The name of a lawyer in Paris was included who would answer all my questions, and if at any time he could be of assistance, etc, etc. The name at the end was un-

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familiar—but then, of course, everybody knew Count Regis de Manfure, Deputy Foreign Minister for Security; good old Reggie. . . .

I read the letter twice, then folded it and crammed it back into the envelope. My hands were quivering.

"Who gave you this?" my voice came out hoarse.

"T'was the doctor, sir. They brought ye in the carriage, two nights since, and he was most particular about ye. A pity about ye're friends having to hurry to catch the steam-packet for Calais—"

"What did he look like?"

"The doctor?" Hilda resumed her scrubbing. "He was a tall gentleman, sir; Handsomely dressed, and with a lovely voice. Dark, he was, too. But I saw him only for a moment or two, and in the gloom of the stable-yard I couldn't make out more," she giggled. "But I did mark his eyes were close together as two hazelnuts in an egg-cup."

"Was he alone?"

"There was the coachmen, sir—and I think another gentlemen riding inside, but—"

"Did Mrs. Rogers—Gunvor—see them?"

"Only for a few moment, sir. They were in a shocking hurry. . . ."

Hilda finished with the bath, dried me, helped me into clean pajamas, helped me stagger back to bed and tucked me in. I wanted to ask questions, but sleep came down over me like a flood from a broken dam.

THE next time I woke up, I felt a little more normal. I got out of bed, tottered to the closet, found a suit of strange-looking clothes with narrow trousers and wide lapels, a shirt with ruffles at collar and wrist, shoes with tiny buckles.

But of course they weren't really strange, I corrected myself. Very stylish in fact—and new, with the tailors tag still in the breast pocket.

I closed the closet, went to the window for a look. It was still open, and late afternoon sun glowing in the potted geraniums on the sill. Below was a tidy garden, a brick walk, a white picket fence, and in the distance, a tall-open-work church spire. There was an odor of fresh-cut hay in the air. As I watched, Hilda came around the corner with a basket in her hand and a shawl over her head. She had on a heavy, ankle-length skirt and wooden shoes painted in red. She saw me and smiled up at me.

"Hello there, sir! Have you had ye'r sleep out, now?" She came over, lifted the basket to show me a heap of deep red tomatoes.

"Aren't they lovely, sir? I'll slice ye some for dinner."

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"They look good, Hilda," I said. "How long have I been asleep?"

"This last time, sir . . ?"

"Altogether."

"Well, ye came about midnight; after we tucked ye in, ye slept all through the next day and night, and woke this morning about ten. After ye'r bath ye went back, and slept till now—"

"What time is it?"

"About five—so that's another six hours and more." She laughed. "Ye've slept like one drugged, sir . . ."

I felt a weight slide off me like thawed snow off a steep roof. Drugged! I wasn't sick—I was doped to the eyebrows.

"I've got to talk to Gunvor," I said. "Where is she?"

"In the kitchen, plucking a fine goose for ye'r dinner, sir. Shall I tell her—"

"No, I'm getting dressed. I'll find her."

"Sir, are ye sure ye're feeling well enough."

"I'm fine." I turned back to the closet, fighting the drowsiness that washed around me like thick fog, got out the clothes, donned underwear, a loose-sleeved silk shirt and tight black pants of heavy cavalry twill, eased my feet into the slippers. Out in the narrow, not-quite-straight passage papered in woodland scenes and decorated with framed tintypes, I followed the sounds of clattering crockery, pushed through a swinging door into a low-ceilinged, tile-floored room with a big black coal range, stainless steel sinks where a teen-age girl soaped dishes before a window with a flower-box just outside, a glass-paneled door, a display of copper pots on the wall, and a big scrubbed-looking wooden table where Gunvor stood, working over the goose.

"Why, it's Mr. Bayard!" she blew a feather off her nose, looking flustered.

I leaned on the table for support, trying not to think about the buzzing in my head.

"Gunvor, did the doctor give you any medicine for me?"

"He did indeed, sir; the little drops for ye'r soup, and the white powders for ye'r other dishes—though since ye've taken no solid food as yet—"

"No more medicine, Gunvor." Everything was blacking out around me; I planted my feet, tried to will away the dizziness.

"Mr. Bayard, ye're not strong enough yet—ye shouldn't be on ye're feet!"

"Not . . . going back to bed. Need to . . . walk," I got out. "Get me outside . . ."

I felt Gunvor's arm under mine, heard her excited voice; I was vaguely aware of stumbling up steps, then the coolness of out-of-doors. I tried again, drew a

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couple of deep breaths, blinked away the fog.

"Better," I said. "Just walk me. . ."

Gunvor kept a running string of clucks and suggestions that I lie down right away; I ignored her, kept walking. It was a nice garden, with bricked walks curving and meandering among the vegetable plots, past a rose bed along the side, under fruit trees at the far end, by a tempting bench under a thick-boled oak, and back to the kitchen door.

"Let's go around again," I tried not to lean on Gunvor this time; I was feeling rapidly stronger; I could feel faint stirrings of appetite. The sun was sinking fast, throwing long, cool evening shadows across the grass. After the third lap, I waited by the kitchen door while Gunvor fetched a pitcher from the brown wooden ice box and poured me a glass of cool cider.

"Now ye'll sit and wait for ye'r dinner, Mr. Bayard," Gunvor suggested anxiously.

"I'm all right now," I patted the hand she had laid on my arm.

SHE watched me anxiously as I started off. I breathed deep and tried to sort out my thoughts. Someone had brought me here, drugged, arranged to keep me that way—for how long I didn't know, but I could check that by examining Gunvor's medicine supply. Someone had also been tinkering with my memory; the question of who—and why—needed answering.

I made an effort to cut through the fog, place an authentic recollection. It was June here, I judged, from the tender leaves and the budding roses. Where Had I been in May, or last winter. . . ?

Icy streets, tall buildings grim in the winter night, but inside, warmth, cheer, color, the laughing faces of friendly people and the smile of a beautiful red-head, named. . . named. . .

I couldn't remember. The almost-recollection slipped away like a wisp of smoke in a sudden breeze. Someone had done a good job, using deep hypnotics, no doubt, of burying my recollections under a layer of false memories. Still, they hadn't done as well as they thought; it had taken me only a few hours to throw off the nebulous impressions of a dubious past. Perhaps—

I turned, hurried back to the house. Gunvor was hesitating over a plate of fresh-baked pastries; she ducked something under her apron as I stepped into the room.

"Oh! Ye startled me, sir. . ."

I went across and removed a salt-shaker half filled with a coarse white powder from her hand, tossed it into the basket.

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"No more medicine, I said, Gunvor." I patted her reassuringly. "I know the doctor gave you instructions, but I don't need it any more. But tell me: is there a . . ." I groped for a word; I didn't want to alarm her by asking for a brain doctor, and she wouldn't understand 'psychiatrist'. "A hypnotist?" I waited for signs of comprehension. "Someone who talks to troubled people, soothes them—"

"Ah, Ye mean a mesmerist! But there's none here in the village, alas; only Mother Goodwill," she added doubtfully.

"Mother Goodwill?" I prompted.

"I've nothing against her, mind ye, sir—but there's those that talk of witchcraft. And I was reading just the other day in the Paris *Match* that ye can develop serious neuroses by letting unqualified practitioners meddle with ye'r psyche."

"You're so right, Gunvor," I agreed. "But it's only a little matter of a faulty memory—"

"Are ye troubled with that too, sir?" her face lit up. "I'm that forgetful meself, sometimes I think I should have something done—but then a regular mesmerist's so dear, and as for these quacks—"

"What about Mother Goodwill? Does she live near here?"

"At the other end of the village, sir. But I wouldn't recommend her—not for a cultured gentlemen like ye'rself. Her cottage is very plain, and the old woman herself is something less than a credit to our village. Dowdy, she is, sir—no sense of style at all. And as for clothes—"

"I won't be overly critical, Gunvor. Will you take me to her?"

"I'll summon her here, sir, if ye're determined—but there's a licensed master mesmerist in Ealing, just an hour by coach—"

"Mother Goodwill will do, I think. How soon can you get her here?"

"I'll send Ingalill—but if it's all the same to ye, sir, let me have her up after dinner; I've just popped me goose in, and the pies are browning even now—

"After dinner will be fine. I'll take a few more turns around the garden and develop an appetite worthy of your cooking."

AFTER a second slab of blackberry pie buried in cream too thick to pour, a final mug of ground-at-the-table coffee, and with a healthy snort of brandy with the flavor of a century in a dark cellar safely under my belt, I lit up a New Orleans cigar and watched as Hilda and Gunvor lit the oil lamps in the sitting room. There was a timid tap at the door, and Ingalill, the kitchen slavey, poked her face in.

"The old witch is here," she

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piped. "Gunvor, she's smoking a pipe. I think it's got ground up salamander innards in it—"

"She'll hear ye, ye wretch," Hilda said. "Tell her to wait until her betters summon her—"

Ingalill yelped and jumped aside, and a bent-backed ancient in a poke bonnet pushed in past her, one gnarled hand gripping a crooked stick on which she leaned. Bright black eyes darted about the room, lit on me. I stared back, taking in the warty nose, toothless gums, out-thrust chin, and wisp of white hair hanging beside one hollow cheek. I didn't see a pipe, but as I watched she snorted a last wisp of smoke from her nostrils.

"Who has need of Mother Goodwill's healing touch?" she quavered. "But of course, it'd be you, sir, who've come such a strange, long way, and with a stranger, longer path still ahead . . ."

"Phooie, I told you it was the new gentleman," Ingalill said. "What's in the basket?" she reached to lift a corner of the red and white checked cloth covering the container, yelped as the stick cracked across her knuckles.

"Mind ye'r manners, dearie," Mother Goodwill said sweetly. She shuffled to a chair, sank down, put the basket on the floor at her feet.

"Now, Mother Goodwill," Gunvor said, sounding agitated. "The gentleman only wants a little help with—"

"He'd draw aside the veil of the past, the future to read more clearly," the crone piped. "Ah, he did well to call on old Mother Gee. Now . . ." her tone became more brisk. "If ye'll pour me a dram, Gunvor, to restore me strength a mite—and then ye'll all have to clear out—except m'lord the new gentleman, o' course." She grinned at me like a meat-eating bird.

"I'm not interested in the future," I started—

"Are ye not, sir?" the old woman nodded as though agreeing. "Then it's a strange mortal ye are—"

". . . but there are some things I need to remember," I bored on, ignoring the sales pitch. "Maybe under light hypnosis I can—"

"So . . . Then it's the past ye'd glimpse, as I thought," she commented imperturbably. Gunvor was clicking glasses at the sideboard. She came over and handed the old woman a glass, then got busy clearing dishes from the table, with Ingalill and Hilda working silently beside her.

Mother Goodwill smacked her lips over the brandy, then waved an over-sized brown-spotted hand.

"Away with ye, now me chicks!" she quavered. "I feel the spirit coming over me. The power's flowing in the celestial field-

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coil! Strange visions are stirring, like phantom vipers in a pot! What's this? What's this? Ai, curious indeed, the things the spirits whisper to me now . . ."

"Hummp! Ye can skip the spirits routine," Hilda said. "All Mr. Bayard wants from ye—"

"Get along with ye, girl," the old woman snapped, "Or I'll send a cramp that'll lock ye're knees together that tight the fairest swain this side o' Baghdad'll not unlock 'em! All of ye! Off, now!"

THEY went. Then the hag turned to me.

"Now, down to business, sir," she used a wheedling tone. "What were ye thinking of giving the old woman for a handful of lost recollections? Is it a lover ye've forgot, the raptures of youth, the key to happiness once glimpsed and now forever gone a-glimmering . . . ?"

I was grinning at her. "You'll be well paid; but let's skip the rest of the routine. I'll get straight to the point: I have reason to believe I'm suffering from induced amnesia, probably the result of post-hypnotic suggestion. I'd like you to put me under and see if you counter the block."

Mother Goodwill leaned forward, looked at me keenly.

"There's a strangeness about ye—something I can't put me finger on; it's as though ye'r eyes were focussed on a horizon that other men can't see . . ."

"Granted; I'm a strange character. But not so strange you can't hypnotize—or mesmerize me, I hope."

"Ye say ye've been tampered with, ye'r memories taken from ye; who'd've done a thing like that to ye, lad—and why?"

"Maybe if you're successful, I'll find out."

She nodded briskly. "I've heard of such things; spells of darkness, cast by the light of a blood-red moon—"

"Mother Goodwill," I cut in. "Let's get one thing straight: every time you mention spells, magic, dark powers, or greases, the fee goes down. I'm interested in straight scientific mesmerism. OK?"

"What, good sir? Would ye tell the Mistress of Darkness how to ply her trade?"

The routine was beginning to get tiresome. "Maybe we'd better forget the whole thing." I reached in my pocket for a coin. "My mistake . . ."

"Are ye saying Mother Goodwill's a fraud, then?" her voice had taken on a suspiciously mild note. I looked at her, caught a glint of light from an eye as black and bright as a polished opal. "D'ye think the old woman's out to trick ye, to play ye false, to gull ye fer a new fledged chick, to . . ." her voice droned on,

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coming from far away now, booming like surf in a sea-cave, echoing, echoing . . .

". . . ten!"

My eyes snapped open. A woman with a pale, almost—beautiful face sat, leaning pensively on one elbow, a cigarette in her hand, watching me. Her dark hair was done up in a tight bun; her plain white blouse was open at the collar, showing a strong, graceful neck. There was one dark curl against her forehead.

I looked around the room; it was dark outside now; a clock was ticking loudly somewhere.

"What happened to the old beldame?" I blurted.

The woman smiled faintly, waved a well-manicured hand toward a black cape on the chair beside her, a gnarled stick leaning again it.

"Rather warm for working in. How are you feeling?"

I considered. "Fine. But—" I caught a glimpse of a wisp of stringy grey hair under the edge of the cloak. I got out of my chair, went over and lifted it; there was a warty rubber mask, a pair of gnarly gloves.

"What's the idea of the get-up?"

"I find it helpful in my . . . business. Now—"

"You fooled me, in a bad light, I said. "I take it Gunvor and the others are in on the gag?"

She shook her head. "No one ever sees me in a good light, Mr. Bayard—and no one wishes to approach too close, even then. They're simple people here abouts; in their thoughts warts and wisdom go together—so I seek to fit their image of a village mesmerist, else none would seek my skill. You're the only one who shares my little secret."

"Why me?"

She looked at me searchingly. "You are a most unusual man, Mr. Bayard. A true man of mystery. You talked to me—of many things. Strange things. Things at which the mind reels. You spoke of other worlds, like this our own familiar plane, but different, alien. You talked of men like animals, clothed in shaggy hair—"

"Dzok!" I burst out. My hands went to my head as though to squeeze the recollections from my brain like toothpaste from a tube. "The Hagroon, and—"

"Calmly, calmly, Mr. Bayard," the woman soothed. "Your memories—if true memories they are, and not fever-fancies—are there, intact, ready to be recalled. Rest, now. It was not easy for either of us, this stripping away of veils from your mind. A master mesmerist indeed was he who sought to bury your visions of strange paradises and unthinkable hells—but all lies exposed now." I looked at her and she smiled.

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"I am no journeyman practitioner myself," she murmured. "But all my skill was challenged this night." She rose, went to a framed mirror on the wall, gracefully tucked back a strand of hair. I watched her without seeing her; thoughts of Barbro, the flaming figure in the dark storeroom, the escape with Dzok from the Hagroon cell were jostling each other, clamoring to be remembered, thought about, evaluated.

Mother Goodwill plucked her cape from the chair, swirled it about her shoulders, hunching into the posture of the hag she had been. Her white hands slipped the mask in place, fitting it to her nose and mouth. The gloves and wig followed, and now the bright eyes gazed at me from the wrinkled face of age.

"Rest, sir," the ancient face cackled. "Rest, sleep, dream, and let those restless thoughts seek out and know their familiar places once again. I'll attend ye on the morrow—there's more that Mother Goodwill would learn of the universes ye've told me lurk beyond the threshold of the drab world."

"Wait," I said. "I haven't paid you. . ."

She waved a veined hand. "Ye've paid me well in the stuff visions are wrought on, sir. Sleep, I say—and awake refreshed, strong, with your wits keened to razor's edge. For ye'll be needing all yer strength to face what waits ye in the days yet undawned."

She went out then; I went along the hall to my dark room, threw my clothes on a chair, fell into the feather-mattressed bed, and sank down into troubled dreams.

CHAPTER VII

IT was three days before I felt strong enough to pay my call on Mother Goodwill. Her cottage was a thatch-roofed rectangle of weathered whitewash almost lost under a tangle of wrist-sized rose vines heavy with deep red blossoms. I squeezed through a rusted gate, picked my way along a path over-hung with untrimmed rhododendron, lifted the huge brass knocker, clanked it against the low black oak door. Through the one small, many-paned window, I caught a glimpse of the corner of a table, a pot of forget-me-nots, a thick leather-bound book. There was a humming of bees in the air, a scent of flowers, and a whiff of fresh-brewed coffee. Certainly not the traditional setting for calling on a witch, I thought. . . .

The door opened. Mother Goodwill looking neat in a white shirt and peasant skirt, favored me with a sad smile, motioning me in.

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"No Halloween costume today," I commented.

"You're feeling better, Mr. Bayard," she said drily. "Will you have a mug of coffee? Or isn't it customary in your native land?"

I shot her a sharp look. "Skeptical already?"

Her shoulders lifted and dropped. "I believe what my senses tell me. Sometimes they seem to contradict each the other." I took a chair at the table, glanced around the small room. It was scrupulously clean and tidy, furnished with the kind of rustic authenticity that would have had the ladies of the DAR back home oohing and ahing and overworking the word 'quaint'. Mother Goodwill brought the pot over, poured two cups, put cream and sugar on the table, then sat.

"Well, Mr. Bayard, is your mind clear this morning, your remembrance well restored?"

I nodded, tried the coffee. It was good.

"Don't you have some other name I could call you?" I asked. "Mother Goodwill goes with the fright wig and the warts."

"You may call me Olyvia." She had slim, white hands, and on one finger a fine green stone twinkled. She sipped her coffee and looked at me, as though making up her mind to tell me something.

"You were going to ask me a question," I prompted her. "After I've answered them, maybe you'll clear up a few matters for me."

"Many were the wonders you babbled of in your delerium," she said. I heard a tiny clatter, glanced at her cup; a fine tremor was rattling it against the saucer. She put it down quickly, ducked her hands out of sight.

"Oft have I sensed that there was more to existence than this . . ." she waved a hand to take in everything. "In dreams I've glimpsed enchanted hills and my heart yearned out to them, and I'd wake with the pain of something beautiful and lost that haunted me long after. I think in your wild talk, there was that which made a certain hope spring up again—a hope long forgotten, with the other hopes of youth. Now tell me stranger: that talk of other worlds, like each to other as new-struck silver pieces, yet each with a tiny difference—and of a strange coach, with the power to fly from one to the next—all this was fancy, eh? The raving of a mind sore vexed with meddling—"

"It's true—Olyvia," I cut in. "I know it's hard to grasp at first; I seem to recall I was a bit difficult to convince once. We're accustomed to thinking we know everything; there's a powerful tendency to disbelieve anything that doesn't fit the preconception."

"You spoke of trouble, Brion . . ." she spoke my name

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easily, familiarly; I suppose sharing someone's innermost thoughts tends to relax formalities. I didn't mind; Olyvia without her disguise was a charming woman, in spite of her severe hairdo and prison pallor. With a little sunshine and just a touch of make-up—

I pulled myself back to the subject at hand.

SHE listened attentively as I told her the whole story, from Richthofen's strange interrogation to my sentencing by the Xonijeelians.

"So I'm stuck," I finished. "Without a shuttle, I'm trapped here for the rest of my days."

She shook her head. "There are strange things, Brion, things I should not believe, so wild and fantastic are they. And yet—I do believe. . . ."

"From what little I've learned of this world-line, it's backward technologically—"

"Why, we're a very modern people," Olyvia said defensively. "We have steam power—the ships on the Atlantic run make the crossing in nine days—and there are the balloons, the telegraph, and telephone, our modern coal-burning road cars which are beginning to replace the horse in many parts of the colonies even—"

"Sure, I know, Olyvia—no offense intended. Let's just say that in some areas we're ahead of you. The Imperium has the M-C drive; my own native world has nuclear power, jet aircraft, radar and a primitive space program. Here you've gone in other directions. The point is, I'm stranded here. They've exiled me to a continuum I can never escape from."

"Is it so ill then, Brion? You have a whole world here before you—and now that the artificial barriers have been cleansed from your mind, you'll freely recall these wonders you left behind!" She was speaking eagerly now, excited at the prospect. "You spoke of aircraft; build one! how marvelous to fly in the sky like a bird! Your coming here could mean the dawn of a new Age of Glory for the Empire!"

"Uh-hun," I said ungraciously. "That's great. But what about MY world? By now the Hagroon have probably launched their attack—and maybe succeeded with it! My wife may be wearing chains now instead of pearls!" I got up, stamped over to the window and stared out. "While I rot here, in this back-water world."

"Brion," she said softly behind me. "You find yourself troubled—not so much by the threat to your beloved friends as by the quality of remoteness these matters have taken on . . ."

I turned. "What do you mean, remote? Barbro, my friends, in the hands of these ape-men—"

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"Those who tampered with your mind, Brion, sought to erase these things from your memory. True, my skill availed to lift the curse—but 'tis no wonder that they seem to you now as old memories, a tale told long ago. And I myself gave a command to you while yet you slept, that the pain of loss be eased—"

"The pain of loss be damned! If I hadn't been fool enough to trust Dzok—"

"Poor Brion. Know you not yet it was he who gulled you while you slept, planted the desire to go with him to Xonijeel? Yet he did his best for you or so your memory tells."

"I could have taken the shuttle back," I said flatly. "At least I'd have been there, to help fight them off."

"And yet, the wise ones, the monkey-men of Xonijeel, told that this Zero-zero world did not exist—"

"They're crazy!" I took a turn up and down the room. "There's too much here I don't understand, Olyvia! I'm like a man wandering in the dark, banging into things that he can't quite get his hands on. And now—" I raised my hands and let them fall, suddenly inexpressibly weary.

"You have your life still ahead, Brion. You will make a new place for yourself here. Accept that which cannot be changed."

I CAME back and sat down. "Olyvia, I haven't asked Gunvor and the others many questions; I didn't want to arouse curiosity by my ignorance. The indoctrination Dzok and his boys gave me didn't cover much—just enough to get me started. I suppose they figured I'd get to a library and brief myself. Tell me something about this world; fill me in on your history, to start with."

She laughed—an unexpectedly merry sound.

"How charming, Brion—to be called upon to describe this humdrum old world as though it were a dreamer's fancy—a might-have-been, instead of dull reality."

I managed a sour smile. "Reality's always a little dull to whoever's involved in it."

"Where shall I begin? With ancient Rome? The Middle Ages?"

"The first thing to do is establish a Common History date; the point at which your world's history diverged from mine's. You mentioned 'The Empire'. What empire? When was it founded?"

"Why, the Empire of France, of course . . ." Olyvia blinked, then shook her head. "But then, nothing is 'of course'," she said. "I speak of the Empire established by Bonaparte, in 1799."

"So far so good," I said. "We had a Bonaparte, too. But his em-

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pire didn't last long. He abdicated and was sent off to Elba in 1814—"

"Yes—but he escaped, returned to France, and led his armies to glorious victory!"

I was shaking my head. "He was free for a hundred days, until the British defeated him at Waterloo. He was sent to St. Helena and died a few years later."

Olyvia stared at me. "How strange . . . how eerie, and how strange. The Emperor Napoleon ruled in splendor at Paris for twenty-three years after his great victory at Brussels, and died in 1837 at Nice. He was succeeded by his son, Louis—"

"The Duke of Reichstadt?"

"No; the Duke died in his youth, of consumption. Louis was a boy of sixteen, the son of the Emperor and the Princess of Denmark."

"And his Empire still exists," I mused.

"After the abdication of the English tyrant, George, the British Isles were permitted to enter the Empire as a special ward of the Emperor. After the unification of Europe, enlightenment was brought to the Asians and Africans; today, they are semi-autonomous provinces, administered from Paris, but with their own local Houses of Deputies empowered to deal with internal matters. As for New France—or Louisiana—this talk of rebellion will soon die down; a royal commission has been sent to look into the complaints against the Viceroy."

"I think we've got the C. H. date pretty well pinned down," I said. "Eighteen-fourteen; and it looks as though there's been no significant scientific or technological progress since."

THIS prompted questions which I answered at length. Olyvia was an intelligent and well-educated woman; she was enthralled by my picture of a world without the giant shadow of Bonaparte dominating it.

The morning had developed into the drowsy warmth of noon by the time I finished. Olyvia offered me lunch and I accepted. While she busied herself at the wood-burning stove, I sat by the window, sipping a stone mug of brown beer, looking out at this curious, anachronistic landscape of tilled fields, a black-topped road along which a horse pulled a rubber-tired carriage, the white and red dots of farmhouses across the valley. There was an air of peace and plenty that made my oddly distant recollection of the threat to the Imperium seem, as Olyvia said, like a half-forgotten story, read long ago—like something in the book lying on the table. I picked up the fat, red leather bound volume glanced at the title:

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THE SORCERESS OF OZ by Lyman F. Baum.

"That's funny," I said.

Olyvia glanced over at the book in my hands, smiled almost shyly.

"Strange reading matter for a witch, you think? But on these fancies my own dreams sometimes love to dwell, Brion. As I told you, this one narrow world seems not enough—"

"It's not that, Olyvia; but we've pretty well established that our C. H. date is early in the nineteenth century—but Baum wasn't born until about 1855 or so—nearly half a century later. But here he is . . ."

I flipped the book open, noted the publisher—Wiley & Cotton, New York, New Orleans, and Paris—and the date: 1896.

"You know this book, in your own strange world?" Olyvia asked.

I shook my head. "In my world he never wrote this one . . ." I was admiring a frontispiece by W. W. Denslow, showing a Glinda-like figure facing a group of Gnomes. The next page had an elaborate initial 'I' at the top, followed by the words:

". . . summoned you here," said Sorana the Sorceress, "to tell you . . ."

"It was my favorite book, as a child," Olyvia said. "But if you know it not, how then do you recognize the author's name?"

"He wrote others. The *Wizard of Oz* was the first book I ever read all the way through."

"The Wizard of Oz? Not the Sorceress? How enchanting it would be to read it!"

"Is this the only one he wrote?"

"Sadly, yes. He died the following year—1897."

"1897, that could mean . . ." I trailed off. The fog that had been hanging over my mind for the days since I had awakened here was rapidly dissipating in the brisk wind of a sudden realization: Dzok and his friends had relocated me, complete with phony memories to replace the ones they'd tried to erase, in a world-line as close as possible to my own. They'd been clever, thorough, and humane—but not quite as clever as they thought, a bit less thorough in their research than they should have been—and altogether too humane. I remembered the photo-diagram the Councillors had shown me—and the glowing point, unknown to Imperial Net cartographers, which represented a fourth, undiscovered world lying within the Blight. I had thought at the time that it was an error, along with the other, greater error that had omitted the zero-zero line of the Imperium—

But it had been no mistake. B-1 Four existed—a world with

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a Common History date far more recent than the 15th century—the C. H. date of the closest lines beyond the Blight.

And I was there—or here—in a world where, in 1897 at least one man known in my own world had existed. And if one, why not another—or two others: Maxoni and Cocini, inventors of the M-C drive. . . .

"COULD mean what, Brion?" Olyvia's voice jarred me back to the present.

"Nothing. Just a thought." I put the book down. "I suppose it's only natural that even fifty years after a major divergence, not everything would have been affected. Some of the same people would be born. . . ."

"Brion," Olyvia looked at me across the room. "I won't ask you to trust me; but let me help you."

"Help me with what?" I tried to recapture the casual expression I'd been wearing up until a moment before, but I could feel it freezing on my face like a mud pack.

"You have made a plan; I sense it. Alone, you cannot succeed. There is too much that is strange to you here, too many pitfalls to betray you. Let me lend you what help I can."

"Why should you want to help me—if I were planning something?"

She looked at me for a minute without answering, her dark eyes wide in her pale, classic face.

"I've spent my life in search for a key to some other world . . . some dream-world of my mind. Somehow, you seem to be a link, Brion. Even if I can never go there, it would please me to know I'd helped someone to reach the unattainable shore."

"They're all worlds, just like this one, Olyvia. Some better, some worse—some much, much worse. They're all made up of people and earth and buildings, the same old natural laws, the same old human nature. You can't find your dream-world by packing up and moving on; you've got to build it where you are."

"And yet—I see the ignorance, the corruption, the social and moral decay, the lies, the cheats, the treachery of those who hold the trust of the innocent—"

"Sure—and until we've evolved a human society to match our human intelligence, those things will exist. But give us time Olyvia—we've only been experimenting with culture for a few thousand years. A few thousand more will make a lot of difference."

She laughed. "You speak as though an age were but a moment."

"Compared with the time it

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took us to evolve from an amoeba to an ape—or even from the first Homo Sapiens to the first tilled field—it *is* a moment. But don't give up your dreams; they're the force that carries us on toward whatever our ultimate goal is."

"Then let me lend that dream concrete reality. Let me help you, Brion. The story they told me—that you had fallen ill from overwork as an official of the Imperial Colonial Office, that you were here for a rest cure—'tis as thin as a Parisian night-dress! And Brion . . ." She lowered her voice. "You are watched."

"Watched? By *who*—a little man with a beard and dark glasses?"

"'Tis no jest, Brion! I saw a man last night lurking by the gate at Gunvor's house—and half an hour since, a man well muffled up in scarves passed in the road yonder, as you supped coffee."

"That doesn't prove anything."

She shook her head impatiently. "You plan to fly; I know that. I know also that your visit to me will arouse the curiosity of those who prison you here—"

"Prison me? Why, I'm as free as a bird—"

"You waste time, Brion," she cut me off. "What deed you committed, or why, I know not; but in a contest between you and drab officialdom, I'll support your cause. Now, quickly, Brion! Where will you go? How will you travel? What plan will—"

"Hold on, Olyvia! You're jumping to conclusions!"

"And jump you must, if you'd evade the hounds of the hunter! I sense danger, closing about you as a snare about the roebuck's neck!"

"I've told you, Olyvia—I was exiled here by the Xonijeelian Council; they didn't believe my story—or pretended not to. They dumped me here to be rid of me—they fancy themselves as humane, you know. If they'd meant to kill me, they had every opportunity to do so—"

"They sought to mesmerize your knowledge of the past away; now they watch, their results to judge. And when they see you restive, familiar of a witch—"

"You're no witch—"

"As such all know me here. 'Twas an ill gambit that brought you here by daylight, Brion—"

"If I'd crept out at midnight, they'd have seen me anyway—if they're watching me as you seem to think—and they'd have known damned well I wasn't satisfied with their hand-painted picture of my past."

"At any case, they'll like it not. They'll come again, take you away, and once again essay to numb your knowledge of the worlds, and of your past."

I thought that over. "They

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might, at that," I said. "I don't suppose it was any part of their relocation program to have me spreading technical knowledge among the primitives."

"Where will you go, Brion?"

I hesitated; but what the hell, Olyvia was right; I had to have help. And if she intended to betray me, she had plenty on me already.

"Rome," I said.

She nodded. "Very well. How is the state of your purse?"

"I have a bank account—"

"Leave that. Luckily, I have my store of gold Napoleons buried in the Garden."

"I don't want your money—"

"Nonsense. We'll both need it. I'm going with you."

"You can't—"

"Can, and will!" she said, her dark eyes alight, "Make ready, Brion! We leave this very night!"

THIS is crazy," I whispered to the dark, hooded figure standing beside me on the shadowed path. "There's no reason for you to get involved in this . . ."

"Hush," Olyvia said softly. "Now he grows restless. See him there? I think he'll cross the road now, more closely to spy us out."

I watched the dense shadows, made out the figure of a man; he moved off, crossed the road a hundred yards below the cottage, disappeared among the trees on our side. I shifted my weight carefully, itching under the wild get-up Oylvia had assembled for me—warty face, gnarly hands, stringy white hair, and all. I looked like Mother Goodwill's older brother—as ill-tempered an old duffer as ever gnashed his gums at the carryings-on of the younger generation. Olyvia was done up like Belle Watling in three layers of paint, a fancy red wig, a purple dress that fit her trim figure like wet silk, and enough rings, beads and tinkly earring to stock a gift shop.

"Hist—he steals closer now," my co-conspirator whispered. "Another half minute . . ."

I waited, listening to the monotonous chirrup of crickets in a near-by field, the far-away *oo-mau* of a cow, the yapping of a farm dog. After dark, the world belonged to the animals.

Olyvia's hand touched mine. "Now . . ." I followed as she stepped silently off; I had to crouch slightly to keep below the level of the ragged hedge. There was no moon; only a little faint star-light to help us pick a way along the rutted dirt road. We reached the end of the hedge, and I motioned Olyvia back, stole a look back toward the house. A head was clearly silhouetted against the faint light from the small side window.

"It's OK," I said in a low voice, "He's at the window—"

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There was a crunch of gravel, and a light snapped on, played across the ruts, flashed over me, settled on Olyvia.

"Here, woman," a deep voice growled. "What're ye doing abroad after Bell-toll?"

Olyvia planted a hand on her hip, tossed her head, not neglecting to smile archly.

"Aoow, Capting," she purred. "Ye fair give me a turn! It's only me old gaffer, what oi'm seein orf to the rile-trine."

"Gaffer, is it?" The light dwelt on me again briefly, went back to caress Olyvia's sequinned bosom. "Haven't seen ye about the village before. Where ye from?"

"I float about, as ye might say, Major. A tourist, like, ye might call me—"

"On shank's mare, in the middle of the night? Queer idea o' fun, I call it—and with yer gaffer, too. Better let me see yer identity papers, ducks."

"Well, as it 'appens, I come away in such a rush, they seem to ave got left behind . . ."

"Like that, is it?" I heard a snort from the unseen man behind the light—one of the roving security police who were a fixture of this world, I guessed. "Run off with a fistful o' spoons, did ye? Or maybe lifted one purse too many—"

"Nofink o' that sort! What cheek! I'm an honest, licensed tart, plying 'er profession and keeping her old gaffer, what oi'm the sole support of!"

"Never mind, love; I won't take ye in. A wee sample of yer wares, and I'll forget I ever saw ye." He came close, and a big hand reached out toward Olyvia. She let out a short squeak and jumped back. The cop brushed past me; I caught a glimpse of a tricorn hat, a beak nose, loose jowls, a splash of color on the collar of the uniform; I picked my spot, chopped down hard across the base of his neck with the side of my hand. He yelped, dropped the light, stumbled to hand and knees; the stiff collar had protected him from the full force of the blow. He scrambled, trying to rise; I followed, kicked him square under the chin; he back-flipped and sprawled out, unconscious. I grabbed up the light and found the switch, flicked it off.

"Is he . . . badly hurt?" Olyvia was staring at the smear of blood at the corner of the slack mouth.

"He'll have trouble asking for bribes for a few weeks," I pulled Olyvia back toward the hedgerow. "Let's hope our snooper did not hear anything."

We waited for a minute, then started off again, hurrying now. Far away, a spark of wavering, yellowish light moved across the slope of the hill beyond the village.

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"That's the train," Olyvia said. "We'll have to hurry!"

We walked briskly for fifteen minutes, passed the darkened shops at the edge of town, reached the station just as the puffing coal-burner pulled in. A severe-looking clerk in a dark uniform with crossed chest straps and coat tails accepted Olyvia's money, wrote out tickets by hand, pointed out our car. Inside we found wide seats upholstered in green plush. We were the only passengers. I leaned back in my seat with a sigh. The trains whistle shrilled, a lurch ran through the car.

"We're on our way," Olyvia breathed. She looked ecstatic, like a kid at the fair.

"We're just going to Rome," I said. "Not the land of Oz."

"Who can say," she said, "Whither the road of the future leads?"

CHAPTER VIII

AT the Albergo Romulus, Olyvia and I had adjoining rooms well up under the eaves, with ceilings that slanted down to a pair of dormer windows opening onto a market place with a handsome Rennaissance fountain, the incessant flutter of pigeons wings, and a day and night shrilling of excited Italian voices. We were sitting at the small table in my room, eating a late breakfast of pizzas procured at the corner emporium, washed down with a musty red wine that cost so little that even the local begging corps could afford to keep a mild buzz on most of the time.

"The two men I'm interested in were born somewhere in northern Italy about 1850," I told Olyvia. "They came to Rome as young men, studied engineering and electronics, and in 1893 made the basic discovery that gave the Imperium the Net drive. I'm gambling that if Baum managed to get himself born, and in the nineties was writing something pretty close to what he did in my world—and in the Zero-zero A-line too—then maybe Maxoni and Cocini existed here too; they didn't perfect the M-C drive, obviously—or if they did, the secret died with them—but maybe they came close; maybe they left something I can use."

"Brion, did you not tell me that all the worlds that lie about your Zero-zero line are desolate, blasted into ruin by these very forces? Is it safe to tamper with such fell instruments as these?"

"I'm a fair shuttle technician, Olyvia; I know most of the danger points. Maxoni and Cocini didn't realize what they were playing with; they stumbled on the field by blind luck—"

"And in a thousand million

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other worlds of might-have-been they failed, and brought ruin in their wake . . ."

"You knew all this when we left Harrow," I said shortly. "It's my only chance—and a damned poor chance it is, I'll admit. But I can't build a shuttle from scratch; there's a specially-wound coil that's the heart of the field-generator. I've installed 'em, but I never tried to wind one. Maybe—if there was a Maxoni here, and a Cocini—and they made the same chance discovery—and they wrote up their notes like good little researchers—and the notes still exist—and I can find them—"

Olyvia laughed—a charming, girlish laugh. "If the gods decree that all those ifs are in your favor—why then 'tis plain, they mean you to press on. I'll risk it, Brion. The vision of the Sapphire City still beckons me."

"It's the Emerald City, where I come from," I said. "But we won't quibble over details. Let's see if we can find those notes, first; we'll have plenty of time then to decide what to do with them."

AN hour later, at the local equivalent of a municipal record center, a tired-looking youth in a narrow-cut black suit showed me a three-foot wide ledger in which names were written in spidery longhand in faded ink—thousands of names, followed by dates, places-of-birth, addresses, and other pertinent details.

"*Securo, Signore,*" he said in a tone of weary superiority, "The municipality, having nothing to hide, throws open to you its records—among the most complete archives in existence in the Empire—but as for reading them . . ." he smirked, tweaked his hair-line mustache. "That the Signore must do for himself."

"Just explain to me what I'm looking at," I suggested gently. "I'm looking for a record of Guilio Maxoni, or Carlo Cocini—

"Yes, yes, so you said; and here before you is the registration log in which the names of all new arrivals in the city were recorded at the time identity papers were issued. They came to Rome in 1870, you said—or was it 1880? You seemed uncertain. As for me . . ." he spreads his hands. "I am even more uncertain. I have never heard of these relatives—or friends—or ancestors—or whatever they might be. In them, you, it appears, have an interest. As for me—I have none. There is the book, covering the decade in question. Look all you wish. But do not demand miracles of me! I have duties to perform!" His voice developed an irritated snap on the last words. He favored me with what he thought was a piercing look

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and strutted off to sulk somewhere back in the stacks. I grunted and started looking.

Twenty minutes passed quietly. We worked our way through 1870, started on 1871. The busy archivist peered out once to see what we were doing, withdrew after a sour look. Olyvia and I stood at the wooden counter, poring over the crabbed longhand, each taking one page of about two hundred names. She was a fast reader; before I had finished my page, she had turned to the next. Half a minute later she gave a sharp gasp.

"Brion! Look! Guilio Maxoni, born 1847 at Paglio; trade, artificer—"

I looked. It was the right name, I tried not to let myself get too excited—but my pulse picked up in spite of the voice of prudence whispering in my ear that there might be hundreds of Gulio Maxonis.

"Nice work, girl," I said in a cool, controlled voice that only broke twice on the three words. "What address?"

She read it off; I jotted it down in a notebook I had thoughtfully provided for the purpose, added the other data from the ledger. We searched for another hour, but found no record of Cocini.

MAXONI had lived at number twelve, Via Carlotti, fourth floor, number nine. With the aid of a street map purchased from an elderly entrepreneur in a beret and a soiled goatee who offered us a discount on racy postcards which I declined with regret, we found it—a narrow alley, choked with discarded paper cartons, vegetable rinds, overflowing garbage barrels, and shoeless urchins who dodged madly among the obstacles, cheerfully exchanging bandinage which would have made Mussolini blush. Number twelve was a faded late Rennaissance front of rusticated granite wedged between sagging, boarded-up warehouses no more than a hundred or two years old. Maxoni, it appeared, had started his career in the most modest quarters available; even a century ago, this had been a slum. I pushed open the door, caked with cracked paint, stepped into a narrow hall reeking of garlic, cheese, decay, and less pleasant things.

"It looks terrible, Brion," Olyvia said. "Perhaps we'd best make inquiries first—"

A door opened and a round, olive-red face set in cushions of fat looked out, launched a stream of rapid Italian.

"Your pardon, Madam," I replied in the courtly accents I had learned from the Roman Ambassador to the Imperial court. "We are but foreigners, visiting the Eternal City for the first time.

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We seek the apartment where once our departed relative dwelt, long ago, when the gods favored him with the privilege of breathing the sweet air of sunny Italy."

Her jaw dropped; she stared; then a grin the size of a ten-lira pizza spread across her face.

"Buon giorno, Signore e Signorina!" She squeezed out into the hall, pumped our hands, yelled instructions back into her flat—from which a mouth-watering aroma of ravioli emanated—and demanded to know how she could serve the illustrious guests of fair Italy. I gave her the number of the apartment where Maxoni had lived, ninety-odd years before, and she nodded, started up the narrow stair, puffing like the steam-engine. Olyvia followed and I trailed, admiring the deposits of broken glass, paper, rags and assorted rubbish that packed every step and landing, with a trail winding up through the center, worn by the feet of centuries of tenants. I would have given odds that the bits Maxoni might have contributed were still there, somewhere.

At the top, we went along a narrow hall, past battered-looking doors with white china knobs, stopped at the one at the end.

"There is a tenant, Signore," the landlady said. "But he is away now, at his job in the fish market that I, Sophia Gina Anna Maria Scumatti, procured for him! Believe me, if I hadn't given him an ultimatum that the rent must be paid or out he'd go, he'd be sleeping now, snoring like a serviced sow, while I, Sophia Gina—"

"Undoubtedly the Signora has to endure much from ungrateful tenants," I soothed. I had a hundred lira note ready in my jacket pocket—the same oddly-cut number that had been in the closet at Gunvor's house. I fished the bill out, tendered it with an inclination of the head.

"If the signora will accept this modest contribution—"

Mama Scumatti puffed out her cheeks, threw out her imposing bosom.

"It is my pleasure to serve the guest of Italy," she started; I pulled the bill back.

". . . but let it not be said that I, Sophia Gina Anna Maria Scumatti, was ungracious—" Fat fingers plucked the note from my hand, dropped it into a cleavage like the Grand Canyon. "Would the Signore and Signorina care to enter?" She fumbled a three-inch key from a pocket, jammed it in a keyhole you could have put a finger through, twisted it, threw the door wide.

"Vidi!"

I LOOKED in at a collapsed cot snarled with dirty blankets, a broken-down table strewn with

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garishly colored comics, empty coffee cups, stained, finger-greased glasses, and a half-loaf of dry-looking bread. There was a bureau with a broken mirror with racing tickets tucked under the frame, a wooden Jesus dangling on the wall, and an assortment of empty wine and liquor bottles bearing the labels of inferior brands, scattered about the room in a careless way. The odor of the place was a sour blend of unlaundered bedding, old socks, and a distillery infested with mice.

I looked at Olyvia; she gave me a cool smile, turned to our hostess.

"May we go in?"

Sophia Gina wrinkled her brow at me. "My sister would like to go inside and . . . ah . . . commune with the spirit of our departed progenitor," I translated freely.

The black, unplucked eyebrows went up. "But, as the Signore sees, the room is occupied!"

"We won't touch a thing; just look at it. A very emotional moment for us, you understand."

A knowing look crept over the round face. She gave Olyvia, still wearing her make-up and rings, an appraising once-over, then looked me in the eye; one eyelid dipped in an unmistakable wink.

"Ah, but naturally, Signore! You and your . . . sister . . . would of course wish to commune—in private. Another hundred lira, please." She was suddenly brisk. I forked over silently, trying to look just a little hang-dog.

"I dislike to hurry the signore," the concierge said as she shook the second note down into the damp repository. "But try to finish in say two hours, si? There is the chance that Gino will be back for lunch." An elbow the size and texture of a football dug into my side; two fat, broken-nailed hands outlined an hour-glass in the air; two small, black eyes rolled; then Mama Scumatti was waddling off, a hippo in a black skirt.

"What said the fat scoundrel?" Olyvia demanded.

"Just admiring your figure," I said hastily. "Let's take a look around and see what clues we can turn up."

* * *

Half an hour later Olyvia stood in the center of the room, still wrinkling her nose, hands on hips, a lock of hair curling down over her damp forehead.

"It was a hopeless quest from the first," she said. "Let's be off, before my stomach rebels."

I dusted off my hands, grimy from groping on the backs of shelves and under furniture. "We've looked in all the obvious places," I said. "But what about the unlikely spots? We haven't checked for loose floorboards, se-

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cret panels, fake pictures on the wall—"

"'Tis a waste of time, Brion! This man was not a conspirator, to squirrel away his secrets in the mattress! He was a poor young student, nought more, living in a rented room—"

"I'm thinking of little things he might have dropped; a bit of paper that could have gotten stuck in the back of a drawer, maybe. Nobody ever cleans this place; there's no reason something like that couldn't still be there, even after all these years."

"Where? Ye've had the drawers out, rooted in the base of the chest, lifted that ragged scrap of rug, probed behind the baseboard—"

She trailed off; her eyes were on the boxed-in radiator set under the one small window. The wooden panels were curled, split, loose-fitting. We both moved at once; Olyvia deftly set aside the empty Chianti bottles and the tin can half full of cigarette butts; I got a grip on the top board, lifted gingerly. The whole assembly creaked, moved out.

"Just a couple of rusty nails holding it," I said. "I'll lever it free . . ."

A minute later, with the help of a wooden coat-hanger lettered 'Albergo Torino, Roma', I had eased the housing away from the wall, revealing a rusted iron radiator, a few inches of piping, enough dust-devils to fill a shoe box—and a drift of cigaret butts, ticket stubs, bits of string, hairpins, a playing card, paper clips, and papers.

OLYVIA oooed, went to her knees, I watched as she blew dust aside, fished out a folded menu, half a sheet of yellowed paper with numbers scribbled on it, an envelope with a postmark in the twenties addressed to one Mario Pinotti, two postcards with faded black-and-white photos of local tourist spots, and a brittle square of paper, blank on both sides.

"It was a good idea," I said. "Too bad it didn't pan out." Silently, I replaced the cover, put the bottles and ashtray back. "You were right, Olyvia, let's get back out in the street where we can get a nice wholesome odor of fresh garbage—"

"Brion, look!" Olyvia was by the window, turning the blank scrap of paper at an angle to catch the sun. "The ink has faded, but there was something written here . . ."

I came over, squinted at the paper. There were the faintest of faint marks visible. Olyvia put the paper on the table, rubbed it gently over the dusty surface, then held it up to the mirror. The ghostly outline of awkward penmanship showed as a grey line.

"Rub it a little more," I said

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tensely. "Careful—that paper's brittle as ash." She complied, held it to the mirror again. This time I could make out letters:

"Instituzione Galileo Mercolidi Giugno 7.3 P.M.

"Wednesday, June 7th," I translated. "This just might be something useful. I wonder what year that was . . ?"

"I know a simple formula for calculating the day on which a given date must fall," Olyvia said breathlessly. "It will take but a moment . . ."

She nibbled at her lip, frowning in concentration. Suddenly her expression lightened. "Yes! It fits! June 7, 1871 fell on a Wednesday!" She frowned. "As did that date in 1899, 1911—"

"It's something—that's better than nothing at all. Let's check it out. The Galileo Institute: let's hope it's still in business."

A DRIED-UP little man in arm-bands and an eye-shade nibbled a drooping yellowed mustache and listened in silence, his veined hands resting on the countertop as though holding it in place as a barrier against smooth-talking foreign snoopers.

"1871; that was a considerable time in the past," he announced snappishly. "There have been many students at the Institute since then; many illustrious scientists have passed through these portals, bringing glory to the name of the Galileo." An odor of cheap wine drifted across from his direction. Apparently we had interrupted his mid-morning snort.

"I'm not applying for admission," I reminded him. "You don't have to sell me. All I want is a look at the record of Giulio Maxoni. Of course, if your filing system is so fouled up you can't find it, you can just say so, and I'll report the fact in the article I'm writing—"

"You are a journalist?" He straightened his tie, gave the mustache a twirl, and eased something into a drawer out of sight behind the counter, with a clink of glass.

"Just give me the same treatment you'd accord any humble seeker after facts," I said loftily. "After all, the public is the owner of the Institute; surely it should receive the fullest attention of the staff whose bread and vino are provided by the public's largesse . . ."

That got to him; he made gobbling sounds, hurried away, came back wheezing under a volume that was the twin to the municipal register, slammed it down on the counter, blew a cloud of dust in my face, and lifted the cover.

"Maxoni, you said sir. 1871 . . . 1871. . . ." he paused, popped his eyes at me. "That wouldn't

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be THE Maxoni?" his natural suspicious look was coming back.

"Ahhh . . ." a variety of sudden emotions were hostling each other for space on my face. "THE Maxoni?" I prompted.

"Guilio Maxoni, the celebrated inventor," he snapped. He turned and waved a hand at a framed Daguerrotype, one of a long, sombre row lining the room. "Inventor of the Maxoni churn, the Maxoni telegraph key, the Maxoni Improved Galvanic Buggy whip—it was that which made his fortune, of course—"

I smiled complacently, like an inspector who's failed to find an error in the voucher files. "Very good. I see you're on your toes here at the Institute. I'll just have a look at the record, and then . . ." I let it trail off as Smiley spun the book around, pointed out a line with a chewed fingernail.

"Here it is, right here: his original registration in the College of Electrics. He was just a lad from a poor farming community then; it was here at the Institute that he got his start. We were one of the first, of course, to offer lectures in electrics. The institute was one of the sponsors of the Telegraphic Conference, later in that same year . . ." He rattled on with the sales pitch that had undoubtedly influenced many an old alumnus or would-be patron of the sciences to fork over that extra bundle, while I read the brief entry. The address in the Via Carlotti was given, the fact that Maxoni was twenty-four, a Catholic, and single. Not much help there. . . .

"Is there any record," I inquired, "as to where he lived—after he made his pile?"

The little man stiffened. "Made his pile, sir? I fear I do not understand . . ."

"Made his great contribution to human culture, I mean," I amended. "Surely he didn't stay on at the Via Carlotti very long."

A sad smile twitched at one corner of the registrar's tight mouth.

"Surely the gentleman jests? the location of the Museum is, I think, well known—even to tourists."

"What museum?"

The gnome spread his hands in a gesture as Roman as grated cheese.

"What other than the museum housed in the former home and laboratory of Guilio Maxoni? The shrine wherein are housed the relics of his illustrious career?"

Beside me, Olyvia was watching the man's face, wondering what we were talking about. "Pay dirt," I said to her. Then:

"You don't have the address of this museum handy, by any chance?

This netted me a superior

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smile. A skinny finger pointed at the wall beside him.

"Number twenty-eight, Strada d'Allenzo. One square east. Any child could direct you."

"We're in business, girl," I said to Olyvia.

"Ah . . . what was the name of the paper you . . . ah . . . claim to represent?" the little man's voice was a nice mixture of servility and veiled insolence. He was dying to be insulting, but wasn't quite sure it was safe.

"We're with the Temperance League," I said, and sniffed loudly. "The Maxoni questions were just a dodge, of course. We're doing a piece entitled: *Drinking on Duty, and What it Costs the Taxpayer.*"

He was still standing in the same position, goggling after us, when we stepped out into the bright sunshine.

THE Maxoni house was a conservative, stone-fronted building that would have done credit to any street in the East Seventies back home. Here was a neglected-looking brass plate set above the inner rail beside the glass panelled door, announcing that the Home and Laboratories of the Renowned Inventor Guilio Maxoni were maintained by voluntary contributions to the Society for the Preservation of Monuments to the Glory of Italy, and were open from 9-4, Monday through Saturday, and on Sundays, from 1-6 P. M. A cardboard placard taped to the glass invited me to ring the bell. I did. Time passed. A dim shape moved beyond the glass, bolts rattled, the door creaked open, and a frowzy, sleep-blurred face blinked out.

"It's closed. Go away," a voice like the last whinny of a dying plow horse said. I got a foot into the narrowing space between the door and the jamb.

"The sign says—" I started brightly.

"Forget the sign," the blurry face wheezed. "Come back tomorrow—"

I put a shoulder against the door, bucked it open, sending the charming receptionist reeling back. She caught her balance, hitched up a sagging bra strap, and raised a hand, fingers spread, palm facing her, opened her mouth to demonstrate what was probably an adequate command of Roman idiom—

"Ah—ah, don't say it," I cautioned her. "The Contessa here is unaccustomed to the vigor of modern speech; she's led a sheltered life, tucked away there in her immense palazzo at Lake Constance . . ."

"Contessa?" A hideous leer that was probably intended as a simper contorted the sagging face. "Oh, my, if I only would've known her Grace was honoring

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our little shrine with a visit—" she fled.

"A portal guarded by a dragon," Olyvia said. "And the fair knight puts her to rout with but a word."

"I used a magic spell on her; You're promoted to Contessa now; just smile distantly and act aloof." I looked around the room; it was a standard entry hall, high-ceilinged, cream-colored, with a stained glass window shedding colored light across a threadbare, once-fine rug, picking up highlights on a marble-topped table in need of dusting, twinkling in the cut-glass pendants of a rather nice victorian chandelier. A wide, carpeted stairway led up to a sun-lit landing with another stained-glass panel; a wide, arched opening to the left gave a view of a stuffy-looking library with a heavy table with pots of wax flowers and an open book with a pen and ink-pot beside it. There were rows of shelves sagging under rows of dusty books, uncomfortable looking horse-hair chairs and sofas, a fireplace with tools under a mantel on which china gimcracks were arranged in an uneven row.

"Looks like Maxoni went in for bourgeois luxury in a large way, once he got onto the buggy-whip boom," I commented. "I wonder where the lab is?"

Olyvia and I wandered around the room, smelling the odor of age and dust and furniture polish; I glanced over a few of the titles on the shelves:

Experiments with Alternating Currents of High Potential and High Frequency by Nikola Tesla caught my eye, and a slim pamphlet by Marconi; otherwise the collection seemed to consist of good, solid Victorian novels and bound volumes of sermons. No help here.

THE dragon came back, looking grotesque in a housecoat of electric green—a tribute to Maxoni's field of research, no doubt. A layer of cakey-looking make-up had been hastily slapped across her face, and a rose-bud mouth drawn on by a shaky hand. She laced her fingers together, did a curtsey like a trained elephant, gushed at Olyvia, who inclined her head an eighth of an inch and showed a frosty smile. This example of aristocratic snobbishness delighted the old girl; she beamed so hard I thought the make-up was going to crack like plaster in an earthquake. A wave of an economical perfume rolled over me like a dust storm.

"Her Grace wished to see the laboratories where Maxoni did his great work," I announced, fanning. "You may show us there at once."

She shouldered in ahead of me

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to get a spot nearer the contessa and with much waving of ringed hands and trailing of fringes, conducted us along a narrow hall beside the staircase, through a door into a weedy garden, along a walk to a padlocked shed, chattering away the whole time.

"Of course, the workrooms are not yet fully restored," she fluttered, hauling a key from a baggy pocket. She got the lock open, stopped as she groped inside, grunted as she found the light switch. A yellowish glow sprang up. Olyvia and I stared in at dust, lumpy shapes covered with tarpaulins, dust, heaped carton, dust, grimed windows, and dust.

"He worked *here*?"

"Of course it was not so cluttered then. We're short of funds, you see, your Grace," she got the sell in. "We haven't yet been able to go through the items here and catalogue them, dispose of the worthless things, and restore the laboratory to its original condition . . ." She chattered on, unabashed by Olyvia's silence. I poked around, trying to look casual, but feeling far from calm. It was in this shed—or a near facsimile—that Maxoni had first made the break-through that had opened the worlds of alternate reality. Somewhere here, there might be . . . something I did not know what I was looking for: a journal, a working model not quite perfected . . .

I lifted the corner of the dust cover over a heaped table, glanced at the assortment of ancient odds and ends; awkward, heavy-looking transformers, primitive vacuum tubes, bits of wire—

A massive object at the center of the table caught my eye. I lifted the cover, reached for it, dragged it to me.

"Really, sir, I must insist that you disturb nothing!" my guardian hippo brayed in my ear. I jumped, let the tarp fall; dust whoofed into the air. "This is just as the professor left it, that last, fatal day."

"Sorry," I said, holding my face in what I hoped was a bland expression. "Looks like a collection of old iron, to me."

"Yes, Professor Maxoni was a bit eccentric; he saved all sorts of odd bits and pieces—and he was forever trying to fit them together. He'd had a dream, he used to tell my departed Papa—when he was alive, of course—the professor, I mean—and Papa too, of course—

"Your father worked for Maxoni?"

"Didn't you know? Oh, yes, he was his assistant, for ever so many years. Many the anecdote he could tell of the great man—"

"I don't suppose he's alive?"

"Papa? Dear Papa passed to his reward forty-three—or is it forty-four . . ?"

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"He didn't leave a journal, I suppose—filled with jolly reminiscenses of the Professor?"

"No—Papa wasn't what you'd call a lit'ry man." She paused.

"Of course, the professor himself was most diligent about his journal. Five big volumes; it's one of the great tragedies of the Society that we've not yet had sufficient funds to publish."

"Funds may yet be forthcoming, Madam," I said solemnly. "The Contessa is particularly interested in publishing just such journals as you described.

"Oh!" The painted-on mouth made a lop-sided O to match the exclamation. "Your Grace—"

"So if you'd just fetch it along, so that her Grace can glance over it . . ." I left the suggestion hanging.

"It's in the safe, sir—but I have the key—I know I have the key, somewhere. I had it only last year—or was it the year before . . ?"

"Find it, my good woman," I urged. "Her Grace and I will wait patiently here, thrilling to the thought that it was in this very room that the professor developed his galvanic buggy-whip."

"Oh, no, that was before he took this house—"

"No matter; the journals, please."

"Wouldn't you rather come back inside? The dust here—"

"As I said, we're thrilling to it. Hurry back . . ." I waved her through the door. Olyvia looked at me questioningly.

"I've sent her off to find Maxoni's journals," I said. She must have noticed something in my voice.

"Brion, what is it . . ?"

I stepped to the table, threw back the cover. The heavy assembly I had moved earlier dominated the scattering of articles around it.

"That," I said, letting the note of triumph come through. "is a Moebius-wound coil; the central component of the M-C drive. If I can't build a shuttle with that and the old boy's journals, I'll turn in my badge."

CHAPTER IX

THE workshop I rented was a twelve-by-twenty space under a loft opening off a narrow alleyway that wound from the Strada d' Allenzo to a side-branch of the Tiber, a trail that had probably been laid out by goats, back before Rome was big enough to call itself a town. The former occupant had been a mechanic of sorts; there were rusty pieces of steam-engine still lying in the corners, a few corroded hand-tools resting among the dust-drifts on the sagging wall-shelves at one side of the room, odds and ends of bolts and wash-

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ers and metal shavings trodden into the oil-black, hard-as-concrete dirt floor. The old fellow who leased the premises to me had grumblingly cleared away the worst of the rubbish, and installed a large, battered, metal-topped table. This, plus the Moebius coil, which I had bribed the Keeper of the Flame into letting me borrow, and the journals, constituted my lab equipment. Not much to start moving worlds with—but still, a start.

Olyvia had gotten us rooms nearby, cheaper and better quarters than the Albergo Romulus. There was a small hot-plate in her room, charcoal-fired; we agreed to husband our meagre funds by having two meals a day in, and the other one at one of the small neighborhood pasta palaces where the carafes of wine were put on the table as automatically as salt and pepper back home.

I started my research program by reading straight through all five journals—most of which were devoted to bitter comments on the current political situation—the capitol had just been moved to Rome from Florence, and it was driving prices up—notes on some seemingly pointless researches into magnetism, the details of a rather complicated but strictly Platonic affair with a Signora C., and worried budgetary computations that enlisted my fullest sympathy. Only in the last volume did I start to strike interesting passage—the first, tentative hints of the Big Secret. Maxoni had been experimenting with coils; winding them, passing various types and amounts of electric current through them, and attempting to detect results. If he'd known more modern physics, he'd never have bothered; but in his ignorance, he persevered. Like Edison trying everything from horse-hair to bamboo splints as filaments for his incandescent bulb, Maxoni doggedly tried, tested, noted results, and tried again. It was the purest of pure research; he didn't know what he was looking for—and when he found it, he hadn't known what it was—at least not in this world. Of course, there had been no Cocini here. I didn't know what the latter's role had been, back in the Zero-zero world line; it would be an interesting piece of reading for me when I got back—if I got back—that is if there were any place to get back to—

I let that line of thought die; it wasn't getting me anywhere. The last volume of the journal yielded up its secrets, such as they were—a few scattered and fragmentary mentions of the coil winding, and a line or two regarding strange manifestations obtained with the gold-leaf electro-scope when certain trickle currents were use.

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A WEEK had gone by, and I was ready to start the experimental phase. There were a few electrical supply houses in the city, mostly purveyors to the Universities and research institutes; electricity was far from the Reddy Kilowatt stage in this world. I laid in a variety of storage batteries, oscillators, coils, condensers, vacuum tubes as big and clumsy as milk bottles, plus whatever else looked potentially useful. Then, at Olyvia's suggestion, she mesmerized me, took notes as I repeated everything my subconscious had memorized from the training I'd had in Net Shuttle technology—which turned out to be twice as valuable as Maxoni's notes.

They were pleasant days; I rose early, joined Olyvia for breakfast, walked the two blocks to the shop, and toiled until lunch, recording my results in a book not much different from the ones Maxoni had used a century earlier; this was not a world of rapid change. Olyvia would come by at noon or a little after, looking fresh and cool, and healthier now, with the Roman sun giving her face the color it had lacked back in Harrow. The basket on her arm would produce sandwiches, pizzas, fruit, a bottle of wine; I had a couple of chairs by this time, and we'd spread our lunch on the corner of my formidable work bench, with the enigmatic bulk of the coil lying before us like some jealous idol in need of placating.

Then an afternoon of cut and fit and note, with curious passers-by pausing at the open door to look in and offer polite greetings and shy questionings; by the time a month had passed, I was deferred to by all the local denizens as a mad foreigner with more than a suggestion of the sorcerer about him. But they were friendly, often dropping off a casual gift of a bottle or a salami or a wedge of pungent cheese with a flourish of Roman compliments. Each evening, by the time the sun had dropped behind the crooked skyline across the way and the shop had faded into deep shadow, hardly relieved by the single feeble lamp I had strung up, my eyes would be blurring, my head ringing, my legs aching from the hours of standing, hunched over the table. I would solemnly close the door, attach the heavy padlock, ignoring the fact that the door was nothing but a few thin boards, hung from a pair of rusted hinge held in place by bent nails; then the walk home past the shops and stalls, their owners busy closing up now, up the stairs to the flat for a quick bath in the rust-stained tub down the hall, then out with Olyvia to the evening's treat. Sitting at the wobbly tables on the tile floors, often on a

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narrow terrace crowded beside a busy street, we talked, watched the people and the night sky, then went back to part at the flat door —she to her room, I to mine. It was a curious relationship, perhaps—though at the time, it seemed perfectly natural. We were co-conspirators, engaged in a strange quest, half-detectives, half researchers, set apart from the noisy, work-a-day crowd all around us by the fantastic nature of the wildly impractical dream we were embarked on; she, for reasons of romantic fulfillment, and I, driven by a compulsion to tear through the intangible prison walls that had been dropped around me.

MY estimate of Olyvia's age had been steadily revised downward; at first, in the initial shock of seeing Mother Goodwill unmasked, I had mentally assigned her a virginal fortyishness; later, bedizened in her harlot's finery—and enjoying every minute of the masquerade—she had seemed younger; perhaps thirty-five, I had decided. Now, with the paint scrubbed away, her hair cut and worn in a casual, Roman style, her complexion warm and glowing from the sun and the walks, her figure as fine as ever in the neat, inexpensive clothes she had bought in the modest shops near our flat—I realized with a start one day, watching her scatter bread crumbs for the pigeons behind the shop and laughing at their clumsy waddle, that she was no more than in her middle twenties.

She looked up and caught me staring at her.

"You're a beautiful girl, Olyvia," I said—in a wondering tone, I'm afraid. "What ever got you off on that Mombi kick?"

She looked startled, then smiled —a merrier expression than the Lady Sad-eyes look she used to favor.

"You've guessed it," she said, sounding mischievous. "The old witch in the *Sorceress of Oz*—"

"Yes, but *why?*"

"I told you: my business. Who'd patronize a Wise Woman without warts on her chin?"

"Sure—but why haven't you married?" I started to deliver the old saw about there being plenty of nice young men, but the look on her face saved me from that banality.

"OK, none of my business," I said quickly. "I didn't mean to get personal, Olyvia . . ." I trailed off, and we finished our walk in a silence which, if not grim, was certainly far from companionable.

* * *

Three weeks more, and I had assembled a formidable compilation of data—enough I told Oly-

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via when she came to the shop at ten P.M. to see what had kept me, to warrant starting construction of the secondary circuits—the portion of the shuttle mechanism with which I was most familiar.

"The big job," I said, "was to calibrate the coil—find out what kind of power supply it called for, what sort of field strength it developed. That parts done. Now all I have to do is set up the amplifying and focussing apparatus—"

"You make it sound so simple."

"I'm trying to convince myself," I admitted. "It's a long way from simple; it's a matter of trying to equate a complicated assemblage of intangible forces; a little bit like balancing a teacup on a stream of water, except that I have a couple of dozen teacups, and a whole fire department worth of water-works—and if I threw full power to the thing without the proper controls . . ."

"Then what?"

"Then I'd set up an irreversible catyclysm—of any one of a hundred possible varieties. A titanic explosion, that keeps on exploding; an uncontrolled eruption of matter from another continuum, like a volcano pouring out of the heart of a sun—or maybe an energy drain like Niagara, that would suck the heat away from this spot, freeze the city solid in a matter of minutes, put the whole planet under an ice-cap in a month. Or—"

"'Tis sufficient; I understand. These are fearsome forces you toy with, Brion."

"Don't worry—I won't pour the power to it until I know what I'm doing. There are ways of setting up auto-timed cut-offs for any test I run—and I'll be using trickle power for a long time yet. The disasters that made the Blight happened because the Maxonis and Cocinis of those other A-lines weren't forewarned; they set her up and let her rip. The door to Hell has well-oiled hinges."

"How long—before you'll finish?"

"A few days. There isn't a hell of a lot to the shuttle; I'll build a simple box—out of pine slabs, if I have to; just something to keep me and the mechanism together. It'll be a big, clumsy set-up, of course—not compacted like the Imperial models—but it'll get me there, as long as the power flows. The drain isn't very great. A stack of these six volt cells will give me all the juice I need to get me home."

"And if the Xonijeel were right," she said softly. "If the world you seek lies not where you expect—what then?"

"Then I'll run out of steam and drop into the Blight, and that'll be the end of another nut," I said harshly. "And a good thing too—if I imagined the whole Imperium—"

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"I know you didn't, Brion; but if, somehow, something has . . . gone wrong . . ."

"I'll worry about that when I get to it," I cut her off. I'd been plowing along, wrapping myself up in my occupational therapy. I wasn't ready yet to think about the thousand gloomy possibilities I'd have to face when I stepped into my crude makeshift and threw the switch.

IT was three evenings later, and Olyvia and I were sitting at a window table in one of our regular haunts, having a small glass of wine and listening to the gentle night sounds of a city without neon and internal combustion. She'd been coming by the shop for me every evening lately; a habit that I found myself looking forward to.

"It won't be long now," I told her. "You saw the box; just bolted together out of wood, but good enough. The coil's installed. Tomorrow I'll lay out my control circuitry—"

"Brion . . ." Her fingers were on my arm. "Look there!"

I twisted, caught a fleeting glimpse of a tall, dark figure in a long, full-skirted military-type coat with the collar turned up pushing past through the sparse pedestrian traffic.

"It was—him!" Olyvia's voice was tight with strain.

"All right, maybe it was," I said soothingly. "Take it easy, girl. How sure are you—"

"I'm sure, Brion! The same terrible, dark face, the beard—"

"There are plenty of bearded men in Rome, Olyvia—"

"We have to go—quickly!" She started to get up; I caught her hand, pulled her gently back.

"No use panicking. Did he see us?"

"I—think—I'm not sure," she finished. "I saw him, and turned my face away; But—"

"If he's seen us—if he *is* our boy—running won't help. If he didn't see us, he won't be back."

"But if we hurried, Brion—we need not even stop at the flat to get our things! We can catch the train, be miles from Rome by daylight—"

"If we've been trailed here, we can be trailed to the next town. Besides which, there's the little matter of my shuttle. It's nearly done; another day's work and a few tests—"

"Of what avail's the shuttle, if they take you, Brion?"

I patted her hand. "Why should anyone want to take me? I was dumped here to get rid of me—"

"Brion, think you I'm some village goose to be coddled with this talk? We must act—now!"

I chewed on my lip and thought about it. Olyvia wasn't being soothed by my bland talk—any more than I was. I didn't know what kind of follow-up the Xoni-

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jeelian Web Police did on their deportees, but it was a cinch they wouldn't look kindly on my little home workshop project. The idea of planting me here had been to take me out of circulation; they'd back their play, Olyvia was right about that. . . .

"All right," I got to my feet, dropped a coin on the table. Out in the street, I patted her hand.

"Now, you run along home, Olyvia; I'll do a little snooping, just to satisfy myself that everything's OK. Then—"

"No; I'll stay with you."

"That's silly," I said. "If there *is* any rough stuff, you think I want you mixed up in it? Not that there will be. . . ."

"You have some madcap scheme in mind, Brion; what is it? Will you go back to the workshop?"

"I just want to check to make sure nobody's tampered with the shuttle.

Her face looked pale in the light of the carbide lamp at the corner.

"You think by hasty work to finish it—to risk your life—"

"I won't take any risks, Olyvia—but I'm damned if I'm going to be thwarted when I'm this close."

"You'll need help. I'm not unclever in such matters."

I shook my head. "Stay clear of this, Olyvia. I'm the one they're interested in, but you could get hurt—"

"How close are you to finishing your work?"

"A few hours; then some tests—"

"Then we'd best be starting; I sense danger close-by this night."

I hesitated for just a moment, then took her hand. "I don't know what I've done to earn such loyalty," I said. "Come on, we've got work to do."

WE went to the flat first, turned on lights, made coffee; then, with the rooms darkened, took the back stairs, eased out into a cobbled alley. Half an hour later, after a circuitous trip which avoided main streets and well-lit corners, we reached the shop, slipped inside. Everything looked just as I'd left it an hour earlier: the six-foot-square box, its sides half slabbed up with boards, the coil mounted at the center of the plank floor, the bright wire of my half-completed control circuits gleaming in the gloom. I lit a lamp, and we started to work.

Olyvia was more than clever with her hands. I showed her once how to attach wire to an insulator, and she was better at it than I was. The batteries required a mounting box; I nailed a crude frame together, fitted the cells in place, wired up a switch, made connections. Every half hour or so, Olyvia would slip outside, make a quick reconnaisance

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—not that it would have helped much to discover a spy sneaking up on us. I couldn't quite deduce the pattern of their tactics—if any. If we had been spotted, surely the shop was under surveillance. Maybe they were just letting me finish before they closed in; perhaps they were curious as to whether it was possible to do what I was trying to do with the materials and technology at hand . . .

* * *

It was well after midnight when we finished. I made a final connection, ran a couple of circuit checks; if my research had been accurate, and my recollection of M-C theory correct, the thing *should* work. . . .

"It looks so . . . fragile, Brion," Olyvia's eyes were dark in the dim light. My own eyeballs felt as though they'd been rolled in emery dust.

"It's fragile—but a moving shuttle is immune to any external influence. It's enclosed in a field that holds the air in, and everything else out. And it doesn't linger long enough in any one A-line for the external temperature or vacuum or what have you to affect it."

"Brion!" She took my arm fiercely. "Stay here! Risk not this frail device! 'Tis not too late to flee! Let the evil men search in vain! Somewhere we'll find a cottage, in some hamlet far from their scheming . . ."

My expression told her she wasn't reaching me. She stared into my eyes for a moment, then let her hand fall and stepped back.

"I was a fool to mingle dreams with drab reality," she said harshly. I saw her shoulders slump, the life go from her face. Almost it was Mother Goodwill who stood before me.

"Olyvia," I said harshly, "For God's sake—"

There was a sound from the door. I saw it tremble, and jumped for the light, flipped it off. In the silence, a foot grated on bricks; there was a sound of rusty hinges, and a lesser darkness widened as the door slid back. A tall, dark silhouette appeared in the opening.

"Bayard!" a voice said sharply in the darkness—an unmistakably Xonijeelian voice. I moved along the wall; the figure advanced. There was a crowbar somewhere near the door. I crouched, trying to will myself invisible, reached—and my fingers closed around the cold, rust-scaled metal. The intruder was two yards away now; I straightened, raised the heavy bar; he took another step, and I jumped, slammed the bar down solidly across the back of his head, saw a hat fly as he stumbled and fell on his face with a heavy crash.

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"Brion!" Olyvia shrieked.

"It's all right!" I tossed the bar aside, reached for her, put my around her.

"You have to understand, Olyvia," I rasped. "There's more at stake here than any one's dream; this is something I have to do. You have your life ahead. Live it —and forget me!"

"Let me go with you, Brion," she moaned.

"You know I can't. Too dangerous—and you'd halve my chances of finding the Zero-zero line before the air gives out." I thrust my wallet into her cloak pocket. "I have to go now." I pushed her gently from me.

"Almost . . . I hope it fails," Olyvia's voice came through the dark. I went to the shuttle, lit the carbide running light, reached in and flipped the warm-up switch. From the shadows, I heard a groan from the creature I had stunned.

"You'd better go now, Olyvia," I called. "Get as far away as you can; go to Louisiana, start over —forget the Mother Goodwill routine. . . ."

The hum was building now—the song of the tortured molecules as the field build, twisting space, warping time, creating its tiny bubble of impossible tension in the massive fabric of reality.

"Goodby, Olyvia. . . ." I climbed inside the fragile box, peered at the makeshift panel. The field strength meter told me that the time had come. I grasped the drive lever and threw it in.

CHAPTER X

THERE was a wrenching sensation, a sputter of arcing current through untried circuits; then the walls flicked from view around me, and I was looking out on the naked devastation of the Blight. No need for view-screens here; the foot-wide gaps between the rough slats gave me a panoramic view of a plain of rubble glowing softly under the light of the moon; a view that shifted and flowed as I watched, blackening into burned ruins, slumping gradually into a lava-like expanse of melted and hardened masonry and steel.

I unclenched my teeth, tried a breath; everything seemed all right; I was riding an egg-crate across Hell, but the field was holding, leashed by the mathematical matrices embodied in a few hundred strands of wire strung just so from nail to nail around my wooden cage. The massive Moebius coil bolted to the floor vibrated nervously—the way my stomach felt. I made an effort to relax; I had a long ride ahead, and there'd be plenty to be nervous about later on.

My half-dozen jury-rigged instruments were obediently giving readings; I looked at the

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trembling needles and tried to think about what they represented. The only map I had was a fuzzy recollection of the photogram the Xonijeelians had showed me. If this *was* a fourth island in the Blight—and I had already decided not to question that assumption—then I was driving in what ought to be close to the correct 'direction'. Methods of navigation in the Net depended on an orientation with an arbitrary set of standard values—measurements of the strength of three of the seemingly infinite number of 'fields' which were a normal part of the multi-ordinal continua. A reading of any three of these values should give a location; noting the progressive changes in the inter-relation of the values provided a plot across the Net—maybe. There was the little matter of calibrating my instruments, determining how far my calculated orientation and vector varied from the actual, estimating my A-entropic velocity, testing my crude controls to see how much steering I could do, and determining how to bring the shuttle into identity square on target when and if I found a target—and all of this before the air became too foul to breathe. There was no problem of food, water, or a place to sleep; I'd be dead long before any such luxuries became necessary.

My first rough approximation from the data on the dials told me that I was moving along a vector at least 150 degrees off the calculated one: I made a cautious adjustment to one of my crude rheostats, winced as the sparks flew, watched the dials to see the results.

They weren't good. Either I was misinterpreting my readings, or my controls were even worse than I'd thought. I scribbled down figures, made some hasty interpolations, and came up with the discovery that I was blasting along at three times my calculated Net velocity, on a course that seemed to be varying progressively. My hastily rigged, untested circuitry was badly out of balance—not far enough out to spill the leashed entropic force in a wild torrent of destruction, but too far out to be soothing.

I made another haphazard adjustment, checked readings; the needles wavered, one back-tracking down the scale, two others moving steadily upward. I made a herculean effort to recall all I'd ever known about emergency navigation, concluded that I had described most of a full circle and was now headed back in the general direction from which I'd started. There wasn't much play left in my controls; I pushed the lever which served as rudder all the way to the left, watched as instruments responded—not enough. I had a few wild

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thoughts of re-rigging the strands of wire that constituted my shield against the boiling holocaust of uncontrolled volcanic destruction now churning and spewing black gas just beyond my lattice-work walls, but gave that up quickly; I couldn't shut down power for anything—not here.

Another ten minutes passed; my watch was ticking away, measuring off some unimaginable quality in my timeless, headlong plunge across the alternate realities. It was like the tooth-gritting wait while the lab technician probes around with his needle, looking for a vein; one second seemed to last forever.

Another reading; no doubt about it now, I was following a roughly spiral course—whether descending or ascending, I couldn't tell. The control circuits were sparking continously; the stresses induced by the unnatural entropic loads were rapidly overheating the undersized wiring. A junction box tacked to a two-by-four was glowing a dull red, and the wood under it was smoking, turning black. As I watched, pale flames licked, caught ran up the wood. I pulled off my high-shouldered, wide-lapelled jacket, slapped at the fire, uselessly. A wire melted through, dropped, spattered fire as it crossed other naked wires, then hung welded into a new position.

For a heart-stopping instant, I braced myself for the lurching drop into identity with the towering pillars of fire thundering silently outside—then realized that, miraculously, the shuttle was still moving. I rubbed smoke-stung eyes, checked dials; the course had changed sharply. I tried to reconstruct the erratic path I had taken, work out a dead-reckoning of my position. It was hopeless. I could be anywhere. The scene beyond the shuttle walls was strange, not like anything I remembered from Blight exploration films I'd seen. A row of steep-sided black cones stretched away to the horizon, each glowering dull red about its crater rim, over which continuous wellings of lava spilled, while vast bubbles burst sending up dense belches of brown smoke that formed a cloud obscuring the moon. Here, it appeared, a new fault-line had been created in the planet's crust, along which volcanos sprouted like weeds in a new-ploughed field.

I had been on my way for about forty minutes now; with a pang of home-sickness I pictured Olyvia, back at the flat, alone. Suddenly I was remembering the days, the evenings we'd spent together, her unfailing spirit, the line of her throat and cheek as we sat at a table, raising glasses in the long Roman twilight . . .

I had had everything there

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a man needed for a good life; maybe I'd been a fool to exchange it for this—a doomed ride on a hell-bound train to nowhere. Maybe. But there hadn't really been any choice. There were things in life a man had to do, or the savor of the salt was gone forever.

I WAS lost now, that was clear enough. For the last hour the shuttle had been charging across the continua blindly, describing an erratic course which varied every time a connection fused and created a new pattern in the control circuits. The post was still smouldering and smoking, using up my scant air and fouling what was left. I had stretched out on the floor some time earlier, trying to find cleaner air; it was about gone now; I coughed with every breath, and my head kept up a steady humming, like a wornout transformer. I was picking up some interesting observations on the effects of modifying shuttle circuitry at full gallop—and observing some new country, never before explored by our Net Scouts—but the chances of my surviving to use it were dwindling with each passing minute. I had scratched a few lines of calculations on the floor with a fragment of charred wood; at the rate at which I was moving, I was deep in the Blight by now; outside the ruined worlds flowed past, a panorama of doomsdays. The volcanoes were gone, shrunken to fiery pits that sparked and hurled fountains of fire into the black sky. I blinked, peering through shrouding mists of steam and smoke; far away, a line of dark hills showed—new hills, created by the upheavals of this world's crust. The smoke thinned for a moment, gave me a clearer glimpse of the distant landscape—

Was that a hint of green? I rubbed at my eyes, stared some more. The hills, dim in the moonlight, seemed to show a covering of plant life; the nearby fire pits seemed quieter now, stilling to glowing pools of molten lava, glazing over into dullness. And there—! A scraggly bush, poking up at the rim of a crater—and another . . .

I drew a breath, coughed, got to hands and knees. The glow was fading from the scene now; unmistakable pin-points of bright green were showing up everywhere; a shoot poked through the black soil, rose, twisted, unfurled a frond, shot up higher, extending leaf after leaf, in a speeded-up motion-picture sequence of growth, each frame a glimpse of a different A-line, varying by a trifle from the next, creating a continuous drama of change—a change toward life. In its erratic wandering, it appeared, the shuttle had

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turned back now toward the edge of the Blight. I watched, saw new shoots appear, spring up, evolve into great tree-ferns, giant cattails towering palmlike trunks, along whose concrete-grey surfaces vines crept like small green snakes, to burgeon suddenly, embrace the vast tree in a smothering outburst of green, clamber over the crown, then sink down as the tree died and fell, only to turn on themselves, mound high, reach, capture a new host . . .

A JUNGLE grew around me now, nourished in the volcanic soil. Orchids as big as dinner plates burst like popcorn, dropped, were replaced by other orchids as big as washtubs. In the bright moonlight, I saw a flicker of motion—a new kind of motion; a moth appeared, a bright spec, grew until he was two feet across, then the vast flower on which he perched closed over him in a frantic flurry of gorgeous wings and flamboyant petals. Nearby, a wall of foliage bulged, burst outward. A head thrust through—gaping jaws like an immense rat closed on vines that coiled, choking. . . . The head changed, developed armor which grew out, blade-like, slicing through the ropes of living plant-fibre; juice oozed, spilled; thorns budded, grew hungrily toward the animal, reached the furred throat—and recoiled, blunted, from armored hide. Then new leaves unfolded, reached to enfold the head, wrapping it in smothering folds of leathery green; it twisted, fought, tearing free only to be entoiled again, sinking down now, gone in a surging sea of green.

I coughed, choked, got to my feet, reached for the control panel, missed and fell. The crack on the head helped for a moment. I tried to breathe, got only smoke; it was now or never; the worlds outside were far from inviting, but there was nothing for me in the shuttle but death by asphyxiation. I could drop into identity, make hasty repairs, study the data I had collected, decide where I was, and try again. . . .

Back to hands and knees; a grip on a board; on my feet now, reaching for the switch, find it in the choking smoke, pull—

There was a shock, a sense of whirling, then a blow that sent me flying against shattering boards, into rubbery foliage and a gush of fresh air . . .

I finished coughing, extricated myself from the bed of vines I found myself in, half expecting to see them reach for me; fortunately, however, the strange cause-and effect sequences of E-entropy didn't apply here; that stream of pseudo-time was as static in normal time as the lat-

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ter was during a shuttle ride.

In the gloom, I made out the shape of the flimsy box that had brought me here, canted against a giant tree-trunk, smashed into a heap of scrap lumber. Smoke was boiling from under the heaped boards, and bright flames showed, starting along a wrist-thick vine, casting flickering light and shadow on surrounding trees and underbrush. There was a board under my foot, still trailing a festoon of wires; I grabbed it up, struggled through to the fire, beat at the flames; it was a mistake; the bruised stems oozed an inflammable sap which caught with bright poppings and cracklings; I was merely fanning the flames. The main chassis of the smashed shuttle was too heavy for me to try to drag back from the blaze. I tried to reach the coil, with some vague idea of salvage, but the fire was burning briskly now; the dry wood flamed up, sending fire high along the tree-trunk, igniting more vines. Five minutes later, from a distance of a hundred yards, I watched a first-class forest fire getting underway.

The rain started then; too late to salvage anything from the shuttle, but soon enough to save the forest. I found shelter of sorts under a wide-leafed bush, and sank into exhausted sleep.

Morning dawned grey, wet, chilly, with water dripping from a billion leaves all around me. I crawled out, checked over assorted bruises, found everything more or less intact. I still had a slight rawness in the throat from the smoke, and somewhere I'd gotten a nice blister on the heel of my left hand, but that seemed a modest toll for the trip I had had. The fire had burned out a ragged oval about a hundred feet across; I walked across the black stubble to the remains of the shuttle, surveyed the curled and charred boards, the blackened lump that had been the coil. The last, faint hope flickered and died; I was stranded for good, this time, with no handy museum to help me out.

There was a vague sensation in my central region that I recognized as hunger. I had a lot of thinking to do, some vain regrets to entertain, a full quota of gloomy reflections on what was happening now back in the Imperial capital; but first, I had to have food—and, if my sketchy knowledge of jungles was any guide, a shelter of some sort against other inhabitants of the region that might consider me to be in that category.

And even before food, I needed a weapon. A bow and arrow would be nice, but it would take time to find a suitable wood, and I'd have to kill something for gut for the string. A spear or club was about all I'd be able to man-

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age in my present state of technological poverty. And even for those, I'd need some sort of cutting edge—which brought me back to the stone age in two easy steps.

Well, the best source for nice useful-sized stones would be a stream—and while there, I could get a drink—not that there was not plenty of water dripping down my neck here. The shoes I wore—stiff, loafer-type clod-hoppers with buckles—weren't the best for negotiating the uneven ground, but after all, my remote ancestors hadn't had that much.

The ground had a slight slope to what I suspected was the east; I pushed my way through the thick growth—not as jungle-like as what I'd seen from the shuttle minutes before my crash landing, but not a nice pic-niccy sort of New England wood either. I kept to the down-slope stopping now and then to listen for gurgling streams or growling bears. The Boy Scout lore paid off; I broke through into a swampy crescent hugging a grey mudflat with a meandering current at its center fifty feet distant. Tight-packed greenery hung over the far side of the watercourse, which curved away around a spit of more of the grey mud. There were no stones in sight. Still, there was plenty of clay—good for pottery making, perhaps, I squatted, dipped up a sample; it was thin and sandy muck, useless.

There was ample room to walk beside the stream; I followed the course for several hundred yards, found a stretch of higher ground where the water came close to a bank of grassy soil. This would make as good a campsite as any. I pulled off my shoes, eased over the edge into the water, sluiced the worst of the soot and mud from myself and clothes. Turning back, I noticed a strata of clean yellowish clay in the bank. It was the real stuff: smooth, pliable, almost greasy in texture. All I needed was a nice fire to harden it, and over which to cook my roasts, chops, fish fillets, et cetera—as soon as I had acquired the latter, using the weapons I would make as soon as I had an axe and a knife. . . .

IT was almost sunset. The day's efforts had netted me one lump of flint, which I had succeeded in shattering into a hand-axe and a couple of slicing edges that any decent flint-worker would have tossed into the discard pile for archaeologists to quarrel over a few thousand years later. Still, they had sufficed to hack off two twelve-foot lengths of a tough, springy sapling, remove the twigs and leaves, and sharpen the small

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ends to approximate points. I had also gathered a few handfuls of small black-berry like fruits which were now giving me severe stomach pains, and several pounds of the pottery clay which I had shaped into crude bowls and set aside for air drying. The skies had cleared off in the afternoon, and I had built a simple shelter of branches and large leaves, and dragged in enough nearly-dry grass for a bed of sorts. And using a strip of cloth torn from my shirt, I had made a small fire-bow. With a supply of dry punk from the interior of a rotted tree, and a more or less smooth stone with a suitable hollow, I was now preparing to make fire. My hardwood stick was less hard than I would have liked, and the bow was a clumsy makeshift, but it was better than just sitting and thinking. I crumbled the wood powder in the hollow, placed the pointed end of the stick against it with the bow string wrapped around it, and started in.

Ten minutes later, with the bow twice broken and mended, the stick dulled, and the punk and my temper both exhausted, I gave it up for the night, crawled into my cosy shelter. Two minutes later, a bellow like a charging elephant brought me bolt upright, groping for a gun that wasn't there. I waited, heard a heavy body crashing through underbrush nearby, then the annoyed growl that went with the kind of appetite that preferred meat. There were a number of large trees in the vicinity; I found one in the dark with amazing speed, climbed it, losing a trifling few square feet of skin in the process, and wedged myself in a high crotch and listened to stealthy footsteps padding under my perch until dawn.

I FOUND the tracks the next morning when I half-climbed, half fell from the tree. They were deeply imprinted, too big to cover with my spread fingers, not counting the claws—on the prints, that is. Some kind of cat, I guessed. Down at the water's edge were more tracks: big hoof-marks the size of saucers. They grew 'em big in these parts. All I had to do was bag one, and I'd have meat for as long as I could stand the smell. I was getting really hungry now; following the stream, I covered several miles to the south, gradually working my way into more open country. There were plenty of signs of game, including the bare bones of something not quite as big as a London bus, with condor-like birds picking over them half-heartedly. I had my two spears and my stone fragments, and I was hoping to spot something appropriate to my resources—say a half-grown rabbit.

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There was a sudden rattle of wings just in front of me, and a grousy-looking bird as big as a turkey took to the air. I advanced cautiously, found a nest with four eggs in it, speckled brown, three inches long. I squatted right there and ate one, and enjoyed every scrap. It would have been nice to have scrambled it, but that was a minor consideration. The other three I distributed in various pockets, then went on, feeling a little better now.

The country here was higher, with less underbrush and more normal-looking trees in place of the swampy jungle growth I'd started from. During highwater, I imagined, the whole area where the shuttle lay would be submerged. Now I had a better view, off through the open forest to what seemed like a prairie to the south. That's where the game would be.

Another half hour's walk brought me to the edge of a vast savannah that reminded me of pictures I'd seen of Africa, with immense herds grazing under scattered thorn trees. Here the trees were tall hardwoods, growing in clumps along the banks of the stream—and the animals were enough to make any zookeeper turn in his badge and start keeping white mice. I saw bison, eight feet at the shoulder; massive, tusked almost-elephants with bright pink trunks and pendulous lower lips; deer in infinite variety; and horses built like short-necked giraffes, ten feet high at the shoulder with sloping withers. There they were—and all I had to do was to stick them with my spear.

There was a low snort from somewhere behind me; I whirled, saw a head the size of a rhino's set with two rows of huge, needle-sharp teeth in a mouth that gaped to give me a view of a throat like the intake duct on a jet fighter. There was a body behind the head—ten feet or more of massively muscled tawny, blonde cat, with a hint of mane, faint stripes across the flanks, snow white throat, belly and feet. I took all these details in as the mighty carnivore looked me over, yawned, and paced majestically toward me, frowning across at the distant herds like a troubled politician wondering who to pay the bribe to. He passed me up at a distance of thirty feet, moved out into the area, head high now looking over the menu. None of the animals stirred. King cat kept on, by-passed a small group of mastodons who rolled their eyes, switching their trunks nervously. He had his eye on the bison, among whom were a number of cuddly calves weighing no more than a ton. They moved restlessly now, forming up a defensive circle, like the musk-ox

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of the Arctic. The hunter varied his course, angling to the left. Maybe he was thinking better of it—

With the suddenness of thought, he was running, streaking across the grass in thirty-foot bounds, leaping now, clear over the front rank of tossing horns to disappear as the herd exploded outward in all directions; then he reappeared, standing over the body of a calf, one paw resting affectionately on the huddled tan corpse. The herd stampeded a short distance, resumed feeding. I let out a long breath. *That* was a hunter.

I jumped at a sound, spun, my hand with my trusty spear coming up automatically—

A brown rabbit the size of a goat stood poised on wiry legs, snuffling the air, showing long yellow rat-teeth. I brought the spear back, threw, saw it catch the creature in mid leap as he whirled to flee, knocking him head over long white heels. I came pounding up, swung the second spear like a farmer's wife killing a snake, laid him low.

Breathing hard, I gingerly picked up the bloody carcass, noting the gouge my spear had made, looked around for a place to hide up and feast. Something black moved on my arm. A flea! I dropped the rabbit, captured the parasite, cracked him with a satisfying report. There were plenty more where that one came from, I saw, stirring around in the sparse hair on the foot-long ears. Suddenly I didn't want raw rabbit—or overgrown rat—for lunch.

As suddenly as that the adrenalin I'd been getting by on for the past thirty-six hours drained away, left me a hungry, sick battered cast-away, stranded in a hell-world of raw savagery, an unimaginable distance from a home which I knew I'd never see again. I had been bumbling along from one fiasco to the next, occupying my mind with the trivial, unwilling to face reality; the chilling fact that my life would end, here, in solitude and misery, in pain and fear—and that before many more hours had passed.

I LAY under a tree, staring up at the sky, resting, I told myself—or waiting for another cat, less choosy, to happen along. I had had my chances—more than one—and I'd muffed them all. I'd gotten away clean in the Hagroon shuttle—then let it carry me helplessly along to their dencity, permitted myself to be captured without a struggle, thinking I'd learn something from the gorilla men. And after a combination of the enemy's stupidity and my luck had given me a new chance, a new shuttle—I'd guessed wrong again, let Dzok

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beguile me along to be sentenced to life in exile. And a third time —after my wild guesses had paid off—I had panicked, run from the enemy without waiting to test my home-built shuttle—and ended here. Each time I had made what seemed like the only possible choice—and each time I'd gotten farther from my starting point. Not farther in terms of Net distance, perhaps, but infinitely farther from any hope of rescue—to say nothing of my hope of warning the Imperial authorities of what was afoot.

I got to my feet, started back toward where I'd left the wreckage of the shuttle, with some half-formed idea of searching through the wreckage again—for what, I didn't know. It was the blind instinct of one who had absorbed all the disaster he can for a while, and who substitutes aimless action for the agony of thought.

It was harder now, plodding back over the ground I'd already covered. Following the course of the river, I passed the huge skeleton—abandoned now by the birds—reached the mud-flat where the trampled remains of my crude hut gave a clear indication of the inadequacies of my choice of cam-sites.

I had an idea of sorts then; back at the shuttle there was a lump of metal—the remains of the original Maxoni coil. I might be able to use the material in some way—pound it out into spear-heads, or make a flint-and-steel for fire-starting purposes . . .

The impulse died. My stomach ached, and I was tired. I wanted to go home now, have a nice hot bath, crawl into bed, and be joined there by someone soft and perfumed and cuddly who'd smooth my fevered brow and tell me what a hell of a guy I was. . . .

It was easy to see the mechanics of schizophrenia at work here. From wishing, it was an easy jump to believing. I took a couple of deep breaths, straightened my back, and headed for the burn-site. I'd try to retain my grip on reality a little longer; when it got unbearable, I knew the sanctuary of insanity would be waiting.

THERE were animal tracks across the blackened ground, hoof-marks, paw prints, and—

I bent over, squinting to be sure. Foot-prints, human, or near enough. I knew how Robinson Crusoe felt now; the evidence of a fellow Man gave me a sudden feeling of exposure along my backbone. I made it to the surrounding unburned wall of jungle in three jumps, slid down flat on the ground, and scanned the landscape. I tried to tell myself that this was a lucky break,

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the first real hope I'd had—but an instinct older than theories of the Brotherhood of Man told me that I had encountered the world's most deadly predator; the fact that we might be of the same species just meant competition for the same hunting ground.

My spear wasn't a handy weapon, and my skill with it wasn't anything to strike a medal in prise of. I checked my pocket for one of my stones, found a smashed egg. For a moment, the ludicrousness of the situation threatened to start me snickering; then I heard a sound from nearby—in what direction, I wasn't sure. I eased back, rose up far enough to scan the woods behind me, saw nothing. I tried to think the situation through. If I was right—if it was a man who'd visited here—it was important to establish contact. Even a primitive would have some sort of culture—food, fire, garments of sorts, shelter. I had skills: pottery making, basket weaving, the principle of the bow. We could work out something, perhaps—but only if I could survive the first meeting.

I heard the sound again, saw a deer-like creature making its way across the burn. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding and relaxed. There was no way of knowing how long ago the man-prints had been made. Still, I couldn't lie here forever. I emerged, made a quick check of the burned-out shuttle. Everything was as I'd left it. I took another look at the footprints. They seemed to be made not by a bare foot, but by a heelless sandal of some sort. They came across the burn, circled the shuttle, went away again; and on the latter portion of the trail, they clearly overlay my own booted prints. Whoever my visitor had been, he was following me—or had started out on my trail. It was a thought that did nothing for my peace of mind.

I tried to calm the instinct that told me to get as far from the spot as possible. I needed to meet this fellow—and on terms that I could control. I didn't want to kill him—but neither did I want to try the palm outward 'I friend of long-knife routine. That left—capture.

IT was risky business, working out in the open, but then being alive was a risky business. If the man tracking me had followed my trail, then lost it somewhere on the high ground, it might be a matter of many hours before he came back here to cast about again—and I was sure, for some reason, that he'd do the latter. And when he did—

I had been working hard for two hours now, setting up my snare. It wasn't fancy, and if my

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proposed captive were any kind of woodsman—which he had to be, to survive here—it wouldn't fool him for a moment. Still, it was action of a sort—occupational therapy, maybe, but better than hiding under a bush and waiting—and it was helpful to my morale to imagine that I was taking the initiative.

The arrangement consisted of a shallow pit excavated in the soft soil, covered over with a light framework of twigs and leaves, and camouflaged with a scattering of blackened soil. I had done the digging with my bare hands, helped out by a board from the wreck, and the dirt had been heaped under the brush, out of sight behind the wall of foliage. The hole was no more than four feet deep, but that was sufficient for my purpose—to throw the intruder off-balance, give me the drop on him sufficiently to open negotiations; a handy advantage.

I was hungry enough now to scrape one of the smashed eggs from the lining of my pocket and eat it; but first I had to select my hiding place and get ready to act when the victim stepped into the trap. I picked a spot off to the left, arranged myself so as to be able to jump out at the psychological moment, and settled down to wait.

The pit was dug just in front of the wreckage, at the point where the opening to the interior would lead an inqusitive victim; I had dropped a lacy-edged hanky just inside the opening as an added attraction. It was one Olyvia had lent me to mop my forehead during the last, all-night session, and it still held a whiff of a perfume that would attract a primitive more surely than a scattering of gold coins. I had done all I could; the next step was up to the opposition.

I AWOKE from a light doze to see that it was late evening. The trees were black lace-work against a red-gold sky, and the chirruping of crickets and the shrill tseet! tseet! of a bird were the only sounds against an absolute stillness—

And then the crackle of underbrush, the snap of broken twigs, the sound of heavy breathing. . . . I froze, trying to see through the gloom. He was coming; Hell, he was there! And making no effort at stealth. He was sure of himself, this native—which probably meant that here in his own stamping ground he was top carnivore. I tried to picture the kind of man who could stand up to the King Cat I'd seen, and gave it up as too discouraging. And this was the fellow I was going to trip up and then threaten with a broom handle . . .

I swallowed the old corn husks

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that had gotten wedged in my throat, squinted some more, made out a tall figure coming across the burned ground, stooping, apparently peering around, looking for me, no doubt. The thought gave me no comfort. I couldn't see what kind of weapon he had; I gripped my spear, tried to hold my breathing to a deep, slow rhythm. He was close now, pausing to glance over the shuttle, then turning toward the entrance hold. The handkerchief would be visible in the dim light, and the scent . . . He took a step, another; he was close now, a vague, dark shape in deep shadow—

There was a choked yell, a crashing, a thud, and I was out of my hidey-hole, stumbling across a tangle of roots, bringing my spear up, skidding to a halt before the pale torso and dark head of the man who struggled, scrabbling for a hand-hold, hip-deep in my trap.

"Hold it right there!" I barked through clenched teeth, holding the spear ready with both hands, poised over the man who stood frozen now, a narrow-shouldered, long-armed figure, his face a dark blob under a white head-piece.

"I say, Bayard," Dzok's voice came. "You've led me a merry chase, I must say!"

(Concluded next month)

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TERMINAL

By RON GOULART

The Senior Citizens' Club has an anteroom beyond the red door. Try not to go through.

IT was while the tacky white enameled android was putting the second scoop of beans on his breakfast tray that Penrose began to wonder if he was really old. Penrose put one hand flat on his face, feeling for wrinkles. The serving android flipped another scoop of beans out of the cauldron set in its chest. This one missed the tray and dropped on to the tan blanket of Penrose's bed. The android ticked and more beans fell on the cot.

The old man in the next bed stretched a foot out from under the covers and kicked the andy. The machine ratcheted and whirred, then said, "Good morning. Have a happy day." It rolled away to serve the fat man across the aisle.

"I'm Harrison," said the old man who had booted the android. He was lanky, weathered. His face had deep sharp wrinkles. He turned slightly in the bunk and Penrose saw that he had only one arm.

Penrose hesitated. "I'm Penrose," he said finally. "Excuse me. I'm fuzzy about things." He couldn't remember even yesterday he realized now.

Harrison swallowed a spoonful of orange beans. "You know where you are, don't you?"

Their room was small, metallic, with a low grey ceiling. There were six beds in it. Only five of them occupied. At the far end was a red metal door. "I guess," said Penrose. "I'm not certain."

"Where do you think?"

Penrose looked down at his tray. The two scoops of beans had collapsed into a single pool. "Well, this is Greater Los Angeles. And the date is . . . it's October 15, 2046. Yes, I know that."

"It's the 16th," corrected Harrison.

Nodding, Penrose said, "Oh,

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that's right. I'm missing a day."

"You're in Senior Citizens' Terminal #130," said Harrison.

The men in the other beds were old, too, like Harrison. Penrose touched his face again. "I'm not quite sure why I'm here. I've been having trouble remembering exactly. I have a feeling I'm not . . . not a senior citizen."

"Neither am I," called the fat old man across the aisle. He was pink and grey.

"That's Carlisle," said Harrison. "He has memory trouble, too."

"I know you, Harrison," said Carlisle. "You're a mean old coot. You're old enough to be my grandfather. You maybe are my grandfather. He was a mean old one-armed man, too. Except it was his right arm he was lacking."

The serving android was making harsh scraping sounds now. It had stopped by the bed of a small quiet old man. The man was flat on his back, not moving, breathing softly through his mouth. His hair was long and fine and his skin was a transparent blue-white. "Good morning. Have a happy day," said the android, propping the old man up and spoon feeding him from the cauldron.

"That's Guttenberg," said Harrison. "He's eighty."

"I bet he doesn't know who he is either," said Carlisle.

PENROSE watched Harrison finish breakfast. "Is everyone sick here?"

"No," said Harrison. "You must know all about the Senior Citizens' Terminals. Think about it."

Penrose leaned back against the metal head rest. "The Senior Citizens' Terminals," he said, "are under the jurisdiction of the United States Welfare Squad. And are free to all. The problem of the aged is at a stage of solution never before known. Nearly one hundred old timers are collected each month in each terminal. Because of the Welfare Squad these old folks can live out their golden days without fear of burdening their friends and relations." Now that he thought about it Penrose realized he knew a lot about the terminals. But he didn't know why he was here.

"You're doing excellently," said old Harrison. "Do you recall the recruiting part of this set up?"

"Stop now," said Carlisle. "I'm trying to recollect who I really am and your talk is unsettling to me."

"You're Carlisle," said Harrison. "A retired data processor."

"No, I'm not," said the heavy old man. "I'm a spry young fellow with a name that starts with W."

"About recruiting," Harrison said to Penrose.

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Penrose concentrated. "It is the function of the Welfare Squad to recruit at least a minimum quota of old folks each collection period. Those old timers who are not reclaimed in 30 days are then processed at no extra cost."

"Quit," called out Carlisle. "I don't want to hear about that."

"He's been here 28 days," said Harrison.

The fifth man in the room stood up on top of his cot. He was small with straight-standing white hair and black pockets under his pale eyes.

"There are things of which I
may not speak;
There are dreams that cannot
die;
There are thoughts that make
the strong heart weak,
And bring a pallor to the
cheek,
And a mist before the eye,"
he said.

"That's Remmeroy," said Harrison. "He gets processed next week."

Remmeroy's bed was suddenly pulled out from under him and slid back into the grey metal wall. The old man thunked to the floor.

Harrison swung out of his cot just as it shot away and he caught Penrose up and out of his. "We arise abruptly in this place."

The serving android opened a panel in the wall and buzzed out of the room. "Have a happy day."

THE big blond recreational android joggled Penrose by the shoulder. "No wool gathering, Fowler. This is letter writing time."

Penrose had almost remembered something important. "I'm not Fowler," he said.

The second joggle was harsher. "Letter writing time, pops."

"Sorry," he said. He picked up the speaker tube of the lap letteriter. The andy moved on and Penrose dictated, "To whom it may concern. I still don't know what I'm doing here. I am confused and depressed."

The letteriter jumped out of his lap and began bouncing on the floor, making a bleeting sound. "Negative, negative."

The blond andy was at his shoulder again. "Fowler, you're not doing so good today."

"I guess not."

"You *guess?* Gramps, you *know* not. Now I want you to speak a nice pleasant letter. Get me?"

"Yes, sir." The letteriter crawled up his left leg and settled into his lap, nudging him sharply in the groin. "I'm not sure," said Penrose, "who it is I'm writing to."

"The therapy," said the blond android, "is in the act and is not involved with the recipient at all."

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"Hello, everybody," dictated Penrose. "I'm having a great time here." He felt the android's grip lessen. "I'm having a happy day." The hand was lifted away but Penrose kept saying cheerful things.

Carlisle was having trouble. "I'm trying to communicate with my girl friend," he told the rec andy. "Her name begins with an F or an S."

"Just say you're fond of her," answered the android.

"I am, I am," said Carlisle. "I can't start off the letter with 'Dear F or S.' You see?"

"Start."

"Sweetheart," said Carlisle into his tube.

Remmeroy used his letteriter standing up. He was hunched in a corner with it under his arm.

"When the lamp is shattered
The light in the dust lies dead—
When the cloud is scattered,
The rainbow's glory is shed.
When the lute is broken,
Sweet tunes are remembered not . . ."

"That's right," said the passing android, "keep it cheerful."

Guttenberg, his hands limp at his sides, was propped in a chair. "Come on, gramps," said the android. "Talk. Send off something friendly to your loved ones."

Penrose turned to Harrison, who was sitting next to him, his letter writing done. "Why don't they leave Guttenberg alone? He can't even speak, can he?"

"No," said Harrison.

"It doesn't make sense."

"Not efficient, is it?"

Penrose hesitated. "The Welfare Squad has an able and qualified staff of checkers, the Efficiency Detail. It is their duty to make a thorough inspection periodically of each and every Senior Citizens' Terminal."

"Yes, that's true," said Harrison.

"Of course," said Penrose, "fellows in the Efficiency Detail are overworked and underpaid. Sometimes they can't be as thorough as they'd like to be."

The recreational andy held the speaker up near Guttenberg's mouth. "A ten word message, pops. You can do that much. Come on."

"Can't we stop him?" Penrose asked.

"He turns off automatically when the recreation period ends. Guttenberg is able to hold out till then."

"This happens every day?"

Harrison nodded.

"Therapy time," announced a crisp voice from the wall.

The blond android let go of Guttenberg.

THE therapist was shaped like a portable safe and had a gun metal finish.

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"Now," said Penrose when it was his turn, "this is going to sound odd to you."

"Not at all, Mr. Fowler," said the metal box in a warm voice.

Penrose fidgeted on the armchair that had come up through the floor. "First off, I'm not Fowler. I'm Penrose. Now here's the situation as I see it. Let me, by the way, apologize for being vague in some of the details. I realize now that I've probably been given some kind of medication. Look," he said, rolling up the sleeve of his tan shirt, "you can't help but see the needle marks, several of them. And some in my backside, too. While I appreciate the smooth efficient way I was given medical aid I have to say I'm disturbed that I haven't snapped out of it better."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Fowler," said the therapist.

"No, I'm not Fowler. Let's skip that for a minute. I think I had some sort of accident or something and was taken maybe to the nearest hospital. Fine. However, there seems to be a mistake being made. I'm not this Fowler. In fact you can see that I'm not even old. I'm not a senior citizen. It's hardly efficient, is it? To keep me on here."

"Certainly, certainly."

"When I woke up this morning I was much fuzzier than I am now. Things are starting to fill in for me. I'm certain I'm about thirty four years old. There must be, though I can't remember it as yet, some useful function I fill on the outside. Some part of the essential function of Greater Los Angeles."

"That's surely possible," answered the therapist.

"All you have to do is let them know at Central Control and I'll be able to take off. You must have my outside clothes and ID packet and money someplace."

"You realize that in a terminal of this size we can not be responsible for loss of property," said the machine. "Theft of belongings is naturally lamentable. The responsibility can not be assumed, however, by the terminal staff."

"No," said Penrose, "I'm not grousing about my belongings. Let's go back to the fact that I'm only thirty four years old. I don't belong here."

"To be sure."

"Then you'll do something?"

"You can assume that your problem will be given all the attention it warrants," said the therapist. "I must be getting on to my next patient."

"When exactly will you let me know?" Penrose asked as the machine started to roll toward Carlisle's chair.

"Yes, yes," it said and began talking to Carlisle.

Penrose glanced hopefully at Harrison and the one armed man smiled back.

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AFTER lunch came sitting. Not in the soft chairs that had appeared for therapy but in stiff straight metal ones.

Penrose had his hands capping his knees. "Essentially," he said to Harrison, "the terminals are a positive thing. A solution to the problem of senior clutter."

"That's the Welfare Squad point of view." Harrison's hand rested on his chest.

"Those old timers who don't function anymore in the highly overstocked urban and suburban complex are weeded out," said Penrose. "Should it turn out that an individual senior citizen still has a valid function he can always be reclaimed."

"They say the actual termination is pleasant."

Looking at the red door Penrose said, "Right beyond there isn't it?"

"Yes. This is one of the waiting rooms. You can spend from a day to a week or more here. Depends on processing."

After a moment Penrose said, "I should be back home by late today."

"You know about yourself?"

Penrose shook his head. "Not entirely. I'm aware that I'm only thirty four. I'm in this terminal by mistake. All the details on myself haven't come back to me as yet."

"Still," said Harrison, "don't you wonder?"

"Wonder about what?"

"If this terminal has made a mistake. Perhaps others do, too. Perhaps this one has before."

"No," said Penrose, "that's why they have the Efficiency Detail."

"They slipped up in your case."

There was a brief confusion because Guttenberg fell over sideways out of his chair. Carlisle and Remmeroy righted him.

"A system like this has to have a human element," said Penrose. "Even though the terminal itself is fully automatic. The Efficiency Detail provides that human element. That's why I know the error in my case will be cleared up."

"Suppose," said Harrison.

Remmeroy hopped up on his chair.

"I remember, I remember
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn."

"Suppose what?" asked Penrose.

Harrison shrugged his armless shoulder. "That an Efficiency Detail man came here to Terminal #130 to inspect. They work solo, you know."

"The budget doesn't allow for teams."

"Possibly the last time the Efficiency Detail man was through he overlooked a faulty rail on a ramp. This time as he leaned on it he fell and whacked his head.

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While he was unconscious, before the automatic staff rushed to help, someone might have switched papers with him. Someone named Fowler say. By the time the staff gave him treatment for his fall and shots this Efficiency Detail man would be pretty confused. The equipment here, a lot of it anyway, is old and erratic and they might easily get him mixed up with one of these old fellows. One on his way to a termination waiting room."

"Oh, that's very unlikely," said Penrose.

"I was a rich fuel speculator," said Carlisle. "Before I got mixed up with this wild bunch here. Youngest fellow in my profession. How about you?" he called out to Penrose.

"I can't," he said, "quite remember."

"Does it start with a W?"

The chairs retracted and it was time for naps the wall told them.

Harrison frowned. "Penrose was with the Efficiency Detail."

Penrose was put to sleep before he could say anything to Harrison.

THE serving android was backed into a corner.

"On the blink again," said Carlisle.

For dinner a table had appeared. The five men were arranged around it.

"I'll give it a kick," said Harrison.

Penrose jumped up and got to the android first. "Would you please get hold of the therapist for me."

"Happy day," said the machine.

"Look," said Penrose. "That Harrison. He's trying to tell me I've somehow been mistaken for an old man named Fowler. That it's this Fowler's turn to be terminated today. That kind of mistake is not going to look good on the records." He touched one sticky arm of the enameled android. "I don't know, Harrison could be lying. He says I'm with the Efficiency Detail. The drugs you people gave me. I'm still fuzzy. Will you tell the therapist to please, god, hurry. In case it is true."

"Choice of desert," the andy said.

Remmeroy ran around the table and came slowly toward Penrose and the android.

"The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies
fair."

The old man slammed his fist against the machine and broke his hand.

Penrose exhaled sharply. Somebody would have to come now and look after Remmeroy. Then he'd be able to get word out. If he were with the Efficiency Detail they wouldn't be missing him yet. He only had to report in once a week.

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He covered a good part of Greater Los Angeles and didn't have to file anything until the end of each work week.

Still the Efficiency Detail might be wondering about him already. He'd been here two days now apparently. He didn't recall a family. Civil servants didn't have time for close ties usually.

Remmeroy returned to the table. His good hand locked around his other wrist. He howled once and spun. Then sat quietly in his chair.

Nothing came to help him.

"The night nurse has some loose valves," said Harrison. "May not come at all tonight."

"I was the youngest real doctor in my home town," said Carlisle. "My hometown began with a D or an S."

Penrose cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled.

The red door swung open and the lights in the grey room dimmed.

"Sorry," said Harrison, turning away.

"Nice to have met you," said Carlisle.

Two bright silver androids rolled out of the room beyond the red door. They slid over the floor and took hold of Penrose.

"This is going to mean trouble," said Penrose.

Something jabbed his arm.

"Now, now," said one of the androids. It had the same voice as the therapist. "Things are okay."

"Perfectly," added the other.

They took him into the termination room and guided him into its one straight chair. The chair, once his weight hit it, extended restraining straps around him.

Penrose was not as clear as he had been. "Be sure my message gets through," he said.

The androids were gone and the door closed.

There was a wet sound now. A waterfall it sounded like. And soft organ music began to fill the room.

Penrose tried to remember. He couldn't quite believe that Harrison was right. That he was with the Welfare Squad, with the Efficiency Detail.

It didn't seem to him that he could have been a part of a set up like this. Not at all.

A silver tube slid up out of the floor, then another. A gas with a faint floral odor was being released.

Penrose drifted back in the chair.

The room was doing a smooth job of termination.

"Very efficient," said Penrose.

THE END

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MIRANDA

By JOHN JAKES

The Civil War exerted a strange influence on fantasy writers. Ambrose Bierce uncovered a *strange occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. Now John Jakes discovers one equally strange at another bridge—and at the graves across it.

IN those grim days, men became much less than men, and only something more than animals. This was because we had only the most primitive of objectives: to eat when we could; to sleep if we might; to slaughter, pillage, burn as much as we had strength and endurance to do.

We rode and marched by day and by night. We lived in a daze of dirt, screams, fatigue, disease, death. On every night horizon, red stains seemed to signal that the whole state of Georgia was afire. Rumors ran that the General, who was called Cump behind his back, after his middle name, Tecumseh, intended to bring the Reb government to its knees by devastating the land.

On the road some days after Atlanta, fatigue and illness caught up with me. I blanked out for short periods of time as I rode, though I managed to remain with my unit. Then a more violent spell of fever seized me. I fell out of column to rest. The upshot was, I woke the next dawn to discover I had been left behind. Although I rode half the next night to find the 10th New York House, I failed.

I was lost. I was alone in a rural land full of trees and cabins where the Johnny Rebs might look out at me and snipe me from the saddle.

After I realized I was lost, I rode for another day and part of the next night, still without success. I was armed—my pistol; my saber; and what they called a Texas toothpick, a big wicked fighting knife which a sergeant had swapped me, and which I had put away in my boot. I had no food.

After a period of fever from which I remember nothing, I suddenly found myself on a cor-

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duroy road at the entrance to a dark avenue between gigantic water oaks. I weaved in the saddle. The stars blurred, then sharpened. Otherwise the sky was black. The land smelled of dampness and the smoke of pillage. But I was so far out into the back country, I saw no signs of fires burning.

At the head of the avenue a white glimmering revealed a plantation house. I nudged my weary horse toward it, for I thought I'd seen a lantern gleam. Half way up the avenue between the rustling trees, my horse's hoofs rattled suddenly on boards.

We were crossing a flat bridge, unseen in the dark. It spanned a bubbling creek. My horse's left forehoof came down on rotted board. Planks creaked, snapped. The whole decayed center of the bridge gave way beneath us.

I fell, twisting free of the screaming, frantic animal. I struck the water. It was not deep, but my head cracked a rock. A fresh lance of pain added to that already racking my bones.

THE chill creek water plucked at my elbows. I saw my horse scramble up and blow noisily, unhurt in the fall. If she wandered off, I would have no way to catch up to my unit. I tried to rise. I fell back, and all went dark.

When I opened my eyes again, the aching and chill had grown worse. My teeth rattled. Judging by the silence of the birds and the slight pall in the sky, the time was near false dawn. I dragged myself upright and clambered up the creek bank.

A whinny near one of the water oaks showed that my horse had not wandered off. I lurched toward her, through a clammy ground mist which swirled and eddied around my boots.

This mistiness hid the great house at the head of the avenue, except where a solitary yellow square seemed to glisten, as though a lamp were lit. I walked toward my horse, reached out to stroke her muzzle. Suddenly the back of my neck crawled.

A man peered at me from the mist, a scarecrow-thin figure in sodden clothes so befouled with dirt, it was impossible to recognize what sort they were. His face was stubbled. His mouth hung open in a kind of wrenched grin. His eyes were without pupils, white as milk.

"Give me a hand," I said. "Where can I find some food and a bed?"

The apparition let out a low sound, like a moan. The mist drifted higher. I thought the figure had turned and fled. I stumbled after it.

"Wait! Come back here! I'm a Union officer, I order you to—"

The words floated eerily in the mist. There was no one there.

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Through my fever, I realized that the spectre of the pasty-faced man must be an hallucination, the result of weeks of weariness, hunger, illness, of seeing dead men left behind at the roadside while Cump Sherman's juggernaut moved across Georgia. But I did need help. So I cupped my hands to my mouth and began to shout.

In the echoing silence after my shout, I heard a door creak and slam.

The exertion of calling for help began a new, racking pain in my chest. My boot slipped in a moisture-slimed rock along the creek's bank. I caught a clump of shrub for balance. But I tumbled over, sprawling in the water again.

A sibilant whisper of wind drifted between the water oaks on the avenue. Somehow, as I crouched on hands and knees in the bubbling creek, I knew that a person was coming toward me along that avenue.

I swung my head. The mere exertion started my forehead buzzing and thudding again. I felt that I might blank out. As I made an effort to scrabble toward the bank, my left hand brushed against my holster.

It was empty.

Had my pistol dropped out into the water? I tried to peer under the surface of the black, swirling stuff. I did not see the weapon. Then, as fresh waves of dizziness washed over me, two sensations struck me almost together, one visual, the other aural.

The first was the sight of wavering orange firedots burning through the mist at the tips of a many-branched candlestick.

Someone was carrying the candlestick down the avenue through the mist.

The noise, far out on the road, was the unmistakable clatter of hoofs and wheels. I turned toward it.

A caisson whipped by, rumbling. A squad of cavalrymen in blue rode behind. They wore blue uniforms. I was not totally cut off from Cump Sherman's army after all!

I reared up in the water to shout. The cry never left my mouth. I felt new rushes of dizziness, felt my hands slipping beneath me. My face plunged back in the water, an instant after I had a macabre impression of a beautiful young woman, the many-branched candlestick held in her pale right hand, gazing at me through the mist from the creek bank. The candlelights danced and went out—

* * *

I WOKE with a thick, feverish feeling in my head and a smell of dust in my nostrils. I was staring into the burning candlestick set upon a low table. Beyond

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it, where darkness clotted in the corner of what once must have been a genteel parlor, a fat spider crawled lazily up a cobwebbing near the ceiling.

These impressions, and others, filtered through a haze of fever, made me uneasy. So did the great, grotesque shadows thrown by the sheeted furnishings, and the thick patina of dirt upon the windows. In the sky outside I saw the last, brooding smear of a sunset, indicating that I had been unconscious most of the day.

My hands rested on the arms of a high-backed chair. My booted feet were propped on a low stool in front of me. I became conscious of both my pistol and saber being missing. Just then the saber's blade flashed across my vision and hung there like a glittering metal bar.

I turned my head.

"I thought you'd never come round, Yank."

Her voice was musical but edged with mockery. The wine-velvet gown she wore had seen more prosperous days, like the house and the land. But her body was young and firm, and her chin was tilted up.

She had a pretty mouth, sharp gray eyes and a long, shiny-gold tress of hair tied at the nape of her neck with common string. To see a Southern girl in such a state of disarray, holding a cavalry saber at my throat to boot, would have been an unnerving sight even for a man not plagued by fever.

"How did I get here?"

"Walked. I helped you some."

"I don't remember."

"You going to make a fuss?" she said.

"No," I said. "I guess you could put that through my gullet if I did."

She nodded, almost primly. "Yes, 'twouldn't take much."

"This your place?" I asked.

"Twelveoaks belonged to my husband."

"I don't know where I am, exactly," I said, eyeing that shining strip of iron in her hand, a hand which did not shake by a fraction. "I think I picked up some kind of fever, and I got separated from my unit."

She continued to watch me steadily. "Do you have a name?"

"Coburn," I said. "Captain Joshua Coburn, 10th New York Horse."

"Riding with that devil Sherman?" she said, though tonelessly.

Again I nodded. "Does that earn me the saber through the neck?"

Slowly she raised the blade, examined its shining surface. Then, with a shrug, she laid it on one of the sheet-draped pieces of furniture.

"It should, right enough. Ex-

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cept I haven't quite turned to acting like an animal, even though the Yankees who've been riding through this part of the country have set a fine example. My name is Miranda Saxby."

She walked a step closer, displayed a gold ring on her left hand. "Mrs. Saxby. Or the widow Saxby, you could say."

I MUST make clear that all that happened between us happened as though I saw, heard, took part in it while staring through layers of gauze. I was light-headed, inclined to talk foolishly because of the fever, and unable to summon up much energy to stir from the high-backed chair, even though the sternness of her gaze warned me that, because I was a Union officer, alone and sick, she knew she enjoyed an advantage not many of her fellow-Georgians had enjoyed of late—a chance for revenge.

As if to reinforce this idea, she turned and walked off a ways. She paused by another table where several dusty goblets and a cut glass decanter full of some berry wine had been laid out.

"I've good reason to hate your kind, Captain, don't think I have not," she said, back turned.

The term 'widow' had struck home a moment before. "Your husband, ma'am?"

"Yes." Her skirts rustled as she swung. "Shiloh Church. He was one of the first to die. The slaves have all run off, thanks to that monster who runs your guv'-mint. Down here we call him Linkum the Ape."

She laughed, a sound like bells. But there was little humor in her eyes as she continued, "We heard General Sherman was marching in this district. Most of the owners pulled out, but I stayed. I didn't have a place in the world to go. I came from the sort of place where—well, it was in New Orleans, Captain. Some try to prettify the type of place by calling it a boarding school for young ladies. I saw men killed there. Gamblers, riffraff." She nodded at the saber. "So I'm not exactly unfamiliar with how it's done."

Chill sweat began to bead up on the plams of my hands, and upon my face as well. She unstoppered the decanter. She poured out two goblets of the wine, sipped a bit of hers, then carried the other to me."

"Cherry wine," she said. "Might warm you."

"I could use some food if there's any," I said.

"For a damnyank, you're mighty high-handed in your wants."

For the first and only time during the encounter, I laughed aloud. It came out as more of a

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dry croak. "Ma'am, you've got no reason to like Union soldiers, as you say, and probably plenty of reason for disliking them. So I figure you'll either make things easy for me or kill me, with no inbetween."

Miranda smiled. "That's a fact."

"So which is it? Food or the sword through my neck?"

STANDING there a foot or so in front of me, the wine goblet catching the lights of the candlestick and reflecting them in odd little sparkles in her eyes, she grew tense. She extended the goblet, yet did not offer it fully. A door creaked somewhere. I had a wild, foolish pang of fright.

I wished just then, for no clear reason, that the clattering caisson I'd seen on the corduroy road had wheeled in.

It is not right to say I felt afraid of the Reb widow, yet I did. Consider it this way. I was not afraid of what I saw, namely, a beautiful, hungry, defeated woman who had me at her mercy because I was feverish and weak; I was afraid of something about her I could not see, but only sensed.

"There's plenty of reason for me to hate Yankees," she repeated softly.

"I'm sure there is."

"Don't pretend you hate all this burnin' and killin'."

"Belive whatever you want, but I don't enjoy it."

"Three of them, a sergeant and two corporals—they rode in here a week ago."

"Ours?"

"What else?"

"What did you give them?" I asked. "Wine or the sword?"

I'd spoken rashly, trying to humor her. The wine goblet glittered a she threw it against my face with great violence. The impact of the glass didn't matter much. But the droplets running down through my beard had a nauseatingly sweet stink, and seemed to sting and burn. I rubbed them away and the back of my hand seemed to sting for a time afterward, too.

"They used me," Miranda said in a whisper. "They hurt and used me."

Silent, I watched her. I wondered why she was taking on so.

"The word for it in New Orleans," she said low, "is rape."

Again I was unsure about the proper reaction. Certainly an inmate of a 'boarding school for young ladies' could not have been all that repelled by such an act. It must have been the fact that she and they were partisans of different causes that produced all the pent-up hate I heard seething in her voice. In any case, her quickly-formed fists decided me against commenting on that aspect of it.

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"There are scum in all armies," I said. "In any army, there are scum."

She appeared to compose herself a little. She shook off a light shudder and retrieved the goblet, which somehow had not broken when it fell to the floor. As she poured more wine, she said over her shoulder, "That's bound to be the way you Yanks will explain it. Well, there have been enough others stopping by since."

WHILE I was still wondering about that odd remark, she brought me the glass.

"Here."

"I'll ride out as soon as I'm able," I told her.

"Frankly, Captain, you don't look very damn able."

She almost smiled again. And somehow, in the merry cast of her mouth, I thought I saw one of those little miracles which give the lie to the warmongers who say the Rebs are monsters to a man, or that we are, for that matter. Ill-used by some of Sherman's scavengers, she was still human enough not to kill me outright. I had some dim, pretentious hope or other that, after the bloody conflict was done, people like Miranda Saxby—people even like myself—might bind up the wounds.

I sipped some of the wine. She did also. Then I said:

"Yes, I'm worn out. I could enjoy a night's rest."

"Won't Butcher Sherman miss one of his officers?"

"I've been gone a night already. One more hardly matters."

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "I can give you a bed. But first some food. Wait."

She vanished through a curtain. The house creaked in silence. Outside, full dark had fallen.

An owl hooted in the distance. A whisper of chill air brushed against my cheek. I swung my head. I felt, rather than saw, someone at the edge of the parlor, there in the dark.

I knew I must pull myself up out of the chair. I did, staggering. The saber lay a great distance away. Almost against my own will, I looked around.

The same ghastly white-eyed creature I had glimpsed down by the creek stood in the wide doorway which led from the hall. Behind him, other hideous figures stirred, unseen except for glimmers of empty white eyes.

The right shoulder of the bescummed, pale white apparition in the doorway displayed a tattering of dirty gold. What was it? I pounded my brains, but they were too thick with fever for me to quite grasp at the answer I wanted.

But I was filled with a terror

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beyond anything I had ever experienced.

The thing there in the parlor's entrance had bloated, paste-white cheeks. Down those cheeks ran crooked blackish lines which some inward sense told me were tracks of blood, long dried.

The figure lifted its grimed hands, as though reaching for me. It made a sound with its yellow-toothed mouth, a sound which could only be transcribed as a guttural groan something like, "Urrrrghhh-uh."

The other horrors behind it, three or four of them, it was impossible to tell, took up the plaint until the ghastly moaning, though not excessively loud, seemed to press on my ears with actual pain.

AS I stared, the mewlings of the things standing there intensified. I almost had a feeling that, rather than menace, they represented some kind of warning. The spectre nearest me reached out toward me, and all reason slipped away. With a terrified curse I blundered after the saber, picked it up, whirled around and drove it as hard as I could, straight into the befouled jacket of the creature approaching.

Candlelight seemed to flare up white. I felt an impact through the blade. Blinded, I reeled away a step.

When the dazzle faded, I saw my saber impaled in the woodwork of the great door, vibrating faintly. It had passed through—nothing at all.

The apparitions were gone.

Cold sweat rivered down my cheeks as I dug my knuckles into my eyes and strove to keep from falling. Was I mad? Was I so sick that I saw phantoms?

I started back to the high-backed chair, accidentally knocking against the table bearing the decanter. As I made a vain effort to prevent it, the decanter tipped, crashed to the floor.

The stopper flew out. The cherry wine leaked onto the pegged planking. I watched a tiny wisp of smoke curl up, then another. The wine seeped down through the cracks between the planking, leaving a wide, ugly scar upon the wood.

"Did you see something, Yankee?"

Her muted voice spun me around. She watched from the curtain, where she had appeared suddenly and silently. She carried a small tray on which rested a butt of gray, mold-tinged bread. I swallowed the bile taste of fear and said:

"I'm not certain. There was a man—several men, so it looked like."

"Fever dreams?" she asked, amused.

"They were too real for that.

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One had a patch of gold at his shoulder."

Miranda's golden hair gleamed when she nodded. She set the tray aside as if it were no longer necessary, as if pretense were at an end. Her gray eyes pierced mine.

"Yes, Captain Coburn, he was a full Colonel."

Then I knew:

"His uniform—all fouled with filth. It was a blue uniform."

"That's right, Captan. He was a Yank. Since a week ago, since those first three men came by late one night—" The softness in her face vanished, to be replaced by an angular, blinding fury, as her voice dropped and came buzzing through the fever: "—since then, others have stopped, hunting food, or rest, or an available woman for their brute appetites. Four of them have come, Captain, two together, two separately. And I served them each a bit of wine. Here, come to the window. Your bed is ready."

I TOTTERED half way across that shadow-thick chamber before the awful pain began to twist my belly. I doubled over, tumbling across the high-backed chair.

Cramped in that awkward position, I saw her lift a moldering yellow curtain. Outside, near the window of the plantation house, moonlight gleamed on a patch of black dew-slimed sward. Four small piles of rocks glistened, each at the head of a hump of earth. Yawning beside the mound on the right was a fifth freshly-dug open grave.

Somehow I got my hand down to my boot where the hideout knife was stashed. I drew it though it felt lead-heavy. Miranda Saxby laughed and let the curtain fall.

" 'Twon't do a bit of good on me, Captain, the same as it didn't on them when they came in a while ago."

God help me, somehow I knew she was right.

The motions she made were all the more evil because she attempted to mock the provocative as she turned her back toward me while her hands worked at the sash of her gown.

"I want you to rest well in your bed, Captain. I want you to be warm and comfortable in your bed, so that's why I mean to come into your bed to warm it. At least for a while, anyway, 'till you settle in for a long rest. Don't fret, it won't be so bad."

Abruptly, she dropped her gown so that, as she stood with her back toward me, she was bare to the waist, except for where the soft skin was hidden by the gold banner of her hair hanging down. Over her shoulder she looked at me with the eyes of hell itself.

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"Most men, even Yankees, think I'm pretty, Captain. Don't you?"

The flesh of her back showed three round, crusted, black bullet holes.

For what I did then there can be no apology, no moral justification, save that I knew I faced evil beyond comprehension. I lurched forward and stabbed the knife into her back, up to the hilt.

No blood appeared, not a dropplet, not a stain. Over her shoulder, like some ghastly coquette, Miranda Saxby looked at me with the toothpick sticking from between her shoulderblades, just above the bullet wounds, and she laughed merrily.

If not exactly a brave man, I had never fled from weapons fired in anger. But I fled then, summoning the last vestiges of my fever-sapped strength. I turned and fled with a cry, past the table with the candlestick which I knocked over.

I staggered through the haunted hallway, beating on the outer door until I sprung it open. I stumbled from the porch, smashed my jaw in the dirt as I fell, but somehow managed to get up and continue running, down the avenue between the water oaks. My stomach wrenched and I was sick, my system ridding itself of the poison by violent spasms.

At last I stumbled again and sprawled out, wondering if the wine would still kill me or only drug me, wondering, wondering if I would die this night. The ground on which I fell crawled with eerie radiance.

Lying in the avenue, I twisted over. The candlestick had fired the place. Flames leaped behind the dusk-thick windows. I heard a single, awful, piercing shriek. Then my mind received the blackness again with a full welcome.

A UNION corporal from Ohio, scavenging the neighborhood for provisions in company with a small, tuft-whiskered turncoat Georgian named Hanno, discovered me.

I learned later that they had been loading grain into a wagon at a cabin roughly a mile up the corduroy road when the flames in the sky drew their notice. I wakened with my back propped against one of the water oaks as dawn was breaking. The few timbers of Twelveoaks still standing were black, smoking fingers poked upward to a leaden sky. It had burned to the foundations.

Shaken, uncertain of what I had seen or experienced the night before, I said little to my rescuers at first, drinking from a canteen and gnawing on a hunk of jerky until the Ohio cor-

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poral pressed me for details. I laid aside the canteen, still feeling feverish. There was a fierce ache in my belly. But I felt a peculiar certainty that I would recover because what had transpired in that house last might was worse than any illness ever conceived by man, save perhaps war.

I carefully falsified a story in a cracked voice:

"I rode into this avenue late last evening. When that bridge yonder gave in beneath me, I think I crawled to the creek bank."

"You was a-lyin' right in the middle of the avenue when we come on you, sir," said the corporal.

"Then I must have crawled there. I was in a daze, I don't remember. Except—" This much I had to ask, the man Hanno being a resident of the neighborhood. "—I thought that once a woman looked out of the window of that house. A young, yellow-haired woman. Perhaps the owner's wife. I can't explain how the fire started, but—did you see anything of the woman this morning?"

Hanno tugged at his whisker-tufts. "Just dreams, sir."

"What?"

"Mrs. Saxby, bless her soul—she was killed last week. Now I'm not criticizing you Yankees, sir. No, sir, you've treated me mighty fine, mighty fine indeed." The Ohio corporal snorted in contempt, turning his head as Hanno went on. "—but some elements in the soldiery, well—it was three enlisted men, sir. Union enlisted men, I regret to say. They reined in at Twelve-oaks late one night, asking for provender. I gather they took a shine to Mrs. Saxby because—well, sir, one of the slaves lived long enough afterward to tell the tale. First the Union enlisted men—ah—forced their wills upon Mrs. Saxby, a poor widow lady. Then, because they'd been drinking, these particular soldiers, well—they lined Mrs. Saxby and the four slaves still faithful an' staying with her up against a wall of the house and shot them all in the back. Then they rode about the neighborhood boasting of it, until they moved on. Some of us citizens in the district, we buried them all. Yes, all five, a week ago."

So the crux of it then became, who occupied those graves? In truth, I did not especially want to learn.

THE END

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Red Carpet Treatment

By ROBERT LIPSYTE

A story with a moral for airline travelers. Or is it an im-moral?

"THIS IS YOUR PILOT. DUE TO CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND YOUR CONTROL, THIS AIRCRAFT WILL DESCRIBE A HOLDING PATTERN FOR THE NEXT FIFTEEN MINUTES, THEN ASCEND TO HEAVEN. QUALIFIED PASSENGERS WILL BE ALLOWED TO DISEMBARK. THANK YOU."

IT was the fat priest with the cigarette holder who spoke first, sputtering through a mouthful of purple grapes he was eating out of his pocket.

"What the hell kind of joke is this?"

A little boy began to cry because his mother looked worried, and a young man and his younger wife squeezed each other's hand. The tourist section of the plane, where they all sat, was crowded, but quiet.

Up front, in the first-class section, a stubby man with hairy hands and a monogrammed pink shirt twisted toward the blonde in the window seat. "Must of been a crash, Puff. This is it."

A thin, tanned man with a manicured moustache sitting behind them leaned over. "What'd you say, Max?"

"I said we must of got knocked off." Max patted the blonde's arm. "Don't worry, Puff, just fix your face. Whatever happens, just let Poppa do the talking."

When the stewardesses did not move or fasten smiles on their lacquered faces, the passengers began to look at each other, and then to talk. There were twenty-one people in first-class and fifty-eight in tourist and their voices became suddenly loud as the engine noises faded. The fat priest had swallowed his grapes, unbuckled his safety belt and stepped out into the aisle.

"This is not comical," he said, "This is foul blasphemy, and a cruel joke."

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A gray-haired lady with bright blue eyes pulled at his black sleeve. "Oh, Father, what Glory, we are being transported, gathered into His Arms, as it were."

"As it were, as it were," muttered the priest, sitting down heavily, on the metal buckle.

Up front, the man with the moustache tapped Max on the shoulder. "Will it go hard, Max, you think it'll be bad?"

"Relax, Charlie, you can never tell about these things." Max ran his thick fingers up Puff's arm, but the blonde was repairing her mascara.

Two rows ahead, a portly man in a blue suit was slipping a soft hand inside his shirt and under his left breast, and breathing hard. His wife, a thin woman with the face of a headache, said: "Think about all those Sunday mornings you played golf, Harry."

The young couple in tourist understood now and smiled at each other. "I'm glad we waited, darling, aren't you glad we waited?"

"It was worth waiting for," he said.

"That's not what I meant, darling, I mean we did everything right and now . . ."

The gray-haired lady started to chant, "Bless me, Father, for . . ." but everyone around her began to call to the priest and pluck at his sleeve. He lurched into the aisle again, spitting grape seeds, and ran to the lavatory. It was occupied.

"Mommy?" whimpered the little boy, and his mother smiled and caressed his hand.

"You'll be with Daddy soon, you'll be with . . ."

Suddenly, the engines cut off completely and the plane began to climb.

"Soon, soon," cried the gray-haired lady in tourist, almost orgiastically, and the young couple smiled and kissed the air near each other's cheeks, and the mother held her son tightly and three young women near the galley crossed themselves and the priest was on his knees, his head against the locked lavatory door.

There was great quiet in first class. The portly man had slumped against the window and Max folded fifty dollars into Puff's hand. "We might get separated baby."

The plane landed, and the intercom crackled again.

"THIS IS YOUR PILOT. WE HAVE LANDED IN HEAVEN. ALL FIRST-CLASS PASSENGERS WILL DISEMBARK. THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE CONTINUING WITH US, PLEASE MAKE SURE YOUR SEAT BELTS ARE FASTENED. YOU MAY SMOKE.

THE END

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Typewriters, pumpernickels, sabertooth tigers, solidified musical notes, beef stew—all were grist to his mill. Or, should we say, garbage to the temporal . . .

JUNKMAN

By HAROLD STEVENS

1998 A.D. A team of French archaeologists broke through the wall of an abandoned mine and found themselves in a veritable treasure-house of prehistoric remains. Paintings of reindeer, buffalo, and wild horses covered the walls. A crude stone fireplace in the center of the cave contained bits of charred wood. Nearby was a human skeleton, every bone whole and undamaged. Tools, weapons, and domestic utensils were neatly arranged along one wall, a silent testimonial to paleolithic standards of housekeeping. Among these objects was a heavy black ball which, upon close inspection, revealed the inscription:

KELLY'S ALLEYS
ALL-NITE BOWLING

Subsequent laboratory tests showed the ball to be at least one-hundred thousand years old.

836 A.D. A knight in armor, out for adventure in the English countryside, was knocked from his horse by a typewriter. It came flying through the air from no place, struck him a glancing blow on the head, and disappeared. His helmet saved him from serious injury.

3000 B.C. An Egyptian princess, dallying in her scented bath, looked up to find a fully dressed man sitting in the tub with her. She shrieked, shot out of the water like a porpoise, and bolted from the room. The man sat in the water, his thick eyebrows locked in fury, a cigar butt clamped between his teeth. "Dammit!" he muttered—and dematerialized.

15,000 A.D. A charge of fraud was brought against a distinguished dealer in antiques. Visitors to his gallery inadvertently stumbled upon a wooden crate full of "antiques" that

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looked suspiciously new. One of the items, a primitive electric hand-iron, bore the trademark of Westing & Howes, a famous appliance manufacturing concern that flourished in ancient times. Obviously a fake, the article had apparently just been made, and was now awaiting the clever touch of an unscrupulous expert to give it the appearance of a geniune antique.

500 B.C. A Roman emperor, feeling himself being anointed a little ahead of schedule during coronation, looked up and discovered a battered, filthy can of PRIDE-OF-PENNSYLVANIA motor oil precariously balanced in the rafters above.

1890 A.D. A son was born to George and Mary Klobbet. To the utter amazement of the attending doctors and nurses, the child arrived with his eyes wide open and an enigmatic smile on his face, his little fingers twisting the umbilical cord into the word "Hello." In a burst of inspiration, the parents named him Merlin.

160,000,000 B.C. A large, hungry pterosaur, cruising at five hundred feet along the coast, caught the glitter of sunlight reflecting from the scales of a school of fish in the water below. He wheeled gracefully, poised for a moment perfectly balanced, his wingtip resting precisely on a point of air, then shot straight down, legs and wings swept back along his body. He was plunged ing like a javelin when suddenly, seventy-five feet above the waves, a stale loaf of pumpernickel appeared in his path. With a squawk he threw out his wings in a frantic attempt to brake, but it was no use; he was moving too fast, and a split-second later the cannon-ball shape was firmly impaled on his long, pointed snout. The body came to a dead stop in mid-air, crumpled like an accordion, then pumpernickel and pterosaur together windmilled into the sea. The splash scattered the school of fish, but they streaked back in an instant. Two minutes later the pterosaur's immaculate skeleton came to a gentle rest on the bottom. The pumpernickel, still affixed to the snout, had survived the attack without a scratch, but several dazed fish still swam limpingly in the vicinity trailing wisps of blood from their torn mouths and broken teeth.

1900 A.D. The scientific world is agog at the incredible invention of a ten-year-old New York boy by the name of Merlin Klobbet. The boy—obviously a genius—took an ordinary box camera, made some obscure adjustments, and produced what he calls an "aremac". This device is a sort of camera in reverse. The operator clicks the shutter in the usual way, but the picture, instead of forming inside the contrivance—as it does in a camera—"ma-

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terializes" on the surface of the subject itself. If the subject is a person, he simply steps back out of his picture—which is a full color replica of the exposed side—and that's that. The picture remains standing there. There are, however, several disturbing features to these photo-statues. First of all, they obtain their color directly from the subject, lifting off every bit of pigmentation in skin, hair, eyes, clothes—like dekals. The unfortunate subject is left completely bleached on the side that was exposed. The condition is thought to be permanent. The second disturbing feature is that these photo-statues are indestructible, despite their millionth - of - an - inch thickness. What's more, they are firmly welded to whatever they happen to be standing on. A photo-statue taken of someone standing on the sidewalk could be removed only be digging up the cement and carting away statue and sidewalk together. "There are many additional reasons why I am impounding this "aremac" contraption," the police commissioner stated in an interview, "but I won't go into them now—except to ask you to imagine what would happen if just one lousy busload of tourists got loose in this city taking those damn pictures!"

1810 A.D. Dozens of confused and frightened residents of a small, wealthy community just outside of Boston converged on their church in order to pray, and perhaps to receive a divine explanation for the series of inexplicable events that had occurred simultaneously an hour earlier. These were the events:

Spinster Hortense Morrissa Haggleston, respected Tory and pillar of the church, had just eased herself and, with a complacent sigh, was decorously rising from her chamber-pot when she happened to glance down. She screamed and fainted. Fortunately she fell backward across the bed, and not on top of the infant who lay cooing on the floor between her feet.

The Honorable Judge William A. Bortwright sat down with his famliy for their evening meal. He was justifiably pleased with himself, having had a good constructive day on the bench. He had sentenced three vagrants to long jail terms, imprisoned one editor, banished a War of Independence veteran from the town for "indiscreet imbibing of alcoholic beverages", and had a seventeen-year old girl flogged for kissing her lover in public. Now, while saying grace, he modestly took the opportunity to beg of God that He cast an approving glance upon his (the judge's) good works by blessing their humble repast. Amen. They all looked up to find Spinster Haggleston's chamber-pot, sloshing full, in the middle

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of the table. Simultaneously, the maid rushed in, panic-stricken, to announce that the baby had disappeared.

A farmer sat down to milk his cow, and reached for her udders only to find his arms immersed to the elbows in a tureen of beef stew. "Elsie?" he whispered, incredulously, "Is this *you*?"

The pastor's wife walked out of the kitchen to wake her husband for dinner. She never made it. Instead she found herself clinging for dear life to the very top of the meeting-house spire. A second later her husband woke up to find himself in bed with a cow. The general nature of the other events can easily be surmised.

1900 A.D. When ten-year old Merlin Klobbet was informed of the police commissioner's decision to impound his "aremac", he had a tantrum to end all tantrums. He screamed and gnashed his teeth, he tore out clumps of hair until his scalp bled, he clawed at his face and ripped his clothes, he threw himself down, writhed convulsively, kicked his heels on the floor, and banged his head repeatedly against the legs of the furniture.

500 A.D. The round table fell silent as King Arthur reached up with great dignity and plucked the pale-green bottle from the top of his bejewelled crown. All sat breathless as Arthur studied the smeared, sticky object. Presently he turned to one of the knights beside him and said, "Pray, tell me, good Sir Galahad—knowst thou the meaning of this legend here inscribed? 'Coca Cola'?"

1901 A.D. Pandemonium reigned in Brewster Auditorium last night. The main selection of the concert was to have been Gustave Rauchlitz' daring new "Battle Symphony". The work, famous for its bombastic qualities, is scored for two machine-guns, one small cannon, an exploding powder-keg, and a thunder making machine of the composer's design, in addition to the usual full orchestra. Before the first movement was half finished, the terrified audience was frantically clawing its way out of a forest of gigantic, weird sculptures that had suddenly sprung up all over the auditorium. Several people were injured in the crush. An eleven-year old boy, who was seen leaving the concert with a suspicious-looking bag under his arm, was detained for questioning. He denied having any connection with the events of the evening. When questioned about the contents of the bag, he opened it and proudly showed the police an object that looked like a cylinder with an ear-trumpet attached. He said that it was a "Transmogrifyer", and that he had made it himself. He explained that it converts sounds into beau-

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tiful, solid forms. He identified himself as "Merlin Klobbet, the greatest inventor in history."

1902 A.D. Extract from a report read at an annual staff meeting at Clearhead Sanitarium, a mental hospital in upper New York State.

"Patient was placed in our custody one year ago as a result of his involvement in the famous Brewster Auditorium riot. Has shown no improvement to date. Has frequent temper tantrums, and does not get along with other patients. He amuses himself by playing with a peculiar little machine that produces delightful, three-dimensional abstract figures when he sings gently into it. He refers to himself as 'Merlin the miracle-maker."

50,000 B.C. The saber-tooth and the Neanderthaler faced one another on the narrow ledge. The tiger's muscles were tensed for the spring, and the man stood with his heavy club raised over his head, ready to deliver a crushing blow. The tiger leaped, and the man—disappeared. The tiger's claws and teeth slashed through empty space, and its momentum carried it over the ledge and down into a thornbush. It staggered away bloody, mewing pitifully, to become the first vegetarian cat in history. The Neanderthal man somehow ended up in Rome, almost fifty-thousand years later, where he was captured, tamed, and eventually became the outstanding gladiator of the day.

1930 A.D. "Patient neither improves nor deteriorates. Condition has remained unchanged during the entire twenty-nine years that he has been with us. Spends all his time producing strange inventions. Latest creation is a putty-like substance that changes its atomic structure instantly when middle C is played on the piano. Patient showed us how it works. In the space of five minutes, to the accompaniment of the one note played over and over again, this lump of stuff changed—in rapid succession—into a puddle of water, a piece of lead, a bar of soap, a pile of ashes, a cube of bronze, a slab of rubber, and a quivering chunk of protoplasm. Patient says it is impossible to tell in advance what this substance will turn into, but he 'has hopes' ".

1810 A.D. Dozens of confused and frightened residents of a small, wealthy community on the outskirts of Boston finished their prayers and were leaving the church. They had just reached the bottom steps, when they were engulfed in a blinding storm of

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garbage. They stood petrified, and for a full minute were savagely pelted by chicken bones, pieces of moldy cheese, slices of salami, rotten tomatoes, banana peels, etc. The cloudburst was over as quickly as it had begun, and the people hastened back into the church to pray again, with renewed vigor.

1940 A.D. "Patient Klobbet has escaped from Clearhead. Another patient claims to have heard him at the piano playing the same note he's been playing for the past ten years. According to this witness the music stopped, after which there was a minute of dead silence. Then Klobbet was heard to yell, 'I got it! I finally got it, Goddammit! I got it I got it I GOT IT!!!' "

1941 A.D. The underworld is buzzing with the story of how Pedro Scondrilla, quasi-legal international fence, paid five-million dollars in cold cash for the biggest diamond in history. Scondrilla says that he doesn't know the seller's name, or who he is, but that he checked thoroughly before he put up the dough and everything is legitimate. "This is a one-hundred percent straight, clean deal," he told reporters, "totally and completely on the up and up. I don't know who the guy is—he's kinda weird, I admit—but that is positively not a hot rock. You got my word for it, and you can ask any cop or dealer in the whole (censored) world if ya don't believe me."

1942 A.D. A tall, cadaverous man, with wild eyes and unkempt hair entered a bowling alley near Peekskill, and sought out the owner, a Mr. Clarence Kelly. "Mr. Kelly," he said, "I'm interested in renting the vacant cabin behind your bowling alley."

"What did you say your name was?" Kelly asked, looking at the man with obvious distaste.

"My name," the man said, shoving out his bony chest, "is Merlin the mir . . . —ah, Merlin Klobbet." His words came muffled around a wet, weedy cigar.

"Marvin Corbett?" Kelly said.

"As—yet. Look, Mr. Kelly, I need the place. To store a few things, and—there's some work I have to do, you see. I'll pay you a good price."

"Well . . ." Kelly rubbed his chin doubtfully. This guy looked like a real odd-ball. A character. But, then again, the alley had seen better days. He weakened. "You sure you want it? It's just a junk house, you know. Anything we don't need, that's where it goes."

"It'll be only temporary," Klobbet said.

"O.K." Kelly said. "It's yours. Fifty a week in advance, and you gotta move the junk out yourself."

Klobbet was ecstatic. He slap-

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ped five one-hundred dollar bills into the amazed Kelly's hand. "This should do for a couple of months," he said, "and there's lots more where that came from." He dashed off to the cabin, leaving an acrid trail of smoke behind. "And don't worry," he shouted back over his shoulder, "I'll take care of that junk."

Early that evening Klobbet went out and returned with a huge carton loaded with assorted tools and hardware. Next morning a truck arrived and deposited a load of lumber at the door of the cabin. Klobbet came out rubbing his hands with delight, paid the driver, and hauled the lumber into the cabin singing in a loud, tuneless voice.

DURING the month that followed, the usual thumpings and rumbling of the bowling alley were intermixed with the sounds of hammering, sawing, and wire-snipping. This went on day and night, punctuated irregularly by brief periods of silence during which Klobbet either ate or slept. He left the cabin once every few days to shop for food at a supermarket nearby. The delicatessen counter was his favorite haunt in the store, and after a while, the area around the cabin developed a highly distinctive odor that was a blend of spiced meats, pickles, smelly cheeses, sauerkraut, and cigars.

Kelly's curiosity got the better of him one day, and he stopped Klobbet outside the cabin. "Look, Mr. Corbett," he said hesitantly, "I know it's none of my business, but what the hell's going on in there?"

Klobbet glanced around furtively and clutched the shopping-bag to his chest. Somewhere inside the bag a half-pound of corned-beef yielded up its juices, and greasy spots began to appear on his trousers. Without answering, he made off toward the cabin —then stopped. He stood still for a moment, thinking, then turned back to Kelly with a sly expression on his face. "Come on in," he said, "I'll show you."

Kelly stood in the dim light, breathed the foul air reluctantly, and looked around with revulsion. The place had always been a mess, he remembered, but—nothing like this. The room was cluttered with machine parts, tools, bits of half-consumed food, old soiled clothes, brimming cans of garbage—weeks old and stinking, cardboard cartons of dusty, nondescript rubbish, piles of unmentionable offal—a veritable museum of dry-land flotsam and jetsam.

"This place looks and smells like a damn dump," Kelly said. "When the hell are you gonna clean it out?" Squeamishly, his gaze traveled through the room, resting as briefly as possible on

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each disgusting object. Then his eyes stopped, locked in place. He had discovered the box. Klobbet's facial muscles began to twitch with anticipation, and his cigar began to shuttle excitedly from side to side in his mouth.

The box was a large, open, crate-like affair, decorated with a bizarre confusion of wires, tubes, and switches. It looked like an out-size coffin wired for sound. Kelly walked around it, impressed and mystified at the same time. No words came; he simply stared the question at Klobbet. Klobbet licked his lips with a trembling tongue and cleared his throat. "It's a time machine," he said softly.

Kelly looked at his tenant as though he were seeing him for the first time. Klobbet stood there, a slovenly fierce-looking man, gray hair disheveled, a tattered cigar waving in his mouth. "You don't believe me," he said tightly. "You think I'm lying." He stepped forward, jerkily, his hands stiffening into talons. Danger hung in the air like an invisible thunderhead.

"A kook," thought Kelly. "A real, genuine nut." He glanced around for a possible weapon and quickly settled on a bowling-ball which he snatched from a pile of discarded alley equipment. Klobbet continued advancing, a look of the purest malevolence twisting his face. Kelly brought the ball up, holding it protectively before him, took a step backward, tripped over something, and toppled into the box. He lay there for a moment, dazed, still holding the ball and looking, for all the world, like a bowling champion—in all his glory—about to be laid to rest. The next-to-the-last thing he heard was Klobbet's victory whoop as a lever was slammed down somewhere. The very *last* thing he heard was a flurry of guttural, grunting voices. Then a stone axe cracked open his skull, and there was nothing.

KLOBBET danced around the empty box like a drunken gnome, beside himself with joy. "It worked!" he chattered. "The first try, and it worked! Magnificent Merlin did it again!!"

Fifteen minutes later he was not so happy. Something was wrong with the mechanism. Sometimes the things he put in it would disappear, presumably coming to rest somewhere in the vast continuum of time. Other things went and came right back again. And there were things that appeared unbidden—from God knows where or when. Klobbet shivered with fright at the recollection of the ape-man who had started out of the box to attack him, but had accidentally touched a tube that instantly sent him back into the time-stream.

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He glowered reprovingly at the box, as though it had deliberately, spitefully, tricked him. Then he took a screwdriver and made some adjustments. When he was satisfied, he rummaged through a pile of junk and came up with a stained and scarred toilet-seat. He placed this in the box and pulled the lever. The toilet-seat vanished, and he gave a tentative sigh of relief. A few seconds later he set the dial on "RETURN" and pulled the lever again, but nothing happened. Then suddenly the box began to tremble and heave, and in another moment it lurched and spewed forth a load of fish that spread out in a wriggling carpet at his feet. He began to kick at the fish wildly, then slipped and fell, sending them flopping all over the room. He tore at his hair in frustration and, hissing a stream of poisonous curses, proceeded to shovel the fish back in the box with his bare hands. When he was finished, he stood up shaking with rage, scales shimmering in his hair, one fish tail waving feebly from a pocket. As a final gesture, he flung his cigar into the box, hawked a huge gob of phlegm after it, and slammed down the lever. Everything went, and didn't come back.

He sat down, lit a fresh cigar, rested for a moment, then grimly seized the screwdriver and went to work again. Presently there was a blinding flash, and Klobbet fell back on his haunches, gazing blankly into the box. It was sputtering and sizzling, wires were jerking, and switches snapping themselves on and off. Deep within the recesses of the box scenes began to appear, dimly and jerkily—making Klobbet think of the "flickers" of his youth. He thought he saw a farmer milking a cow, a family at dinner, a lady on top of a house, and other similar, domestic scenes. Everybody seemed to be in early nineteenth century costume. He was just getting interested, when the box gave a convulsive shudder and stopped.

THE scenes faded. Klobbet yanked some wires and twisted some tubes, but nothing happened. In a state of growing anxiety, he grabbed a hammer and started to pound the box mercilessly. Still nothing happened. "Idiot machine!" he shrilled, and, with tears of frustration filling his eyes, hurled the hammer into the box and gave it a vicious kick for good measure. The box rumbled protestingly and belched out a dinosaur egg. Klobbet ducked, and the egg struck the opposite wall, broke, and slithered to the floor leaving a slimy trail behind. The box was silent now.

For several minutes the in-

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ventor and his creation faced one another, each waiting to see what the other would do next. Tentatively, Klobbet regarded the box. He studied the wiring briefly, changed a fuse, and bent over to peer inside. Suddenly it was as though a monster vacuum cleaner had been turned on. Klobbet was sucked into the box with a loud "vthloop"! Five seconds later he was spat back into the room—water pouring from his clothes, reeking from wet cigar and exotic perfume, and quaking with fury. "Fiend!" he croaked at the box. "Imbecile! Abortion! You'll be sorry you were ever invented!!"

Then he went completely mad. He took a wrench and beat the lever permanently into the "ON" position, then he began to pile everything he could get his hands on into the box. A case of empty Coke bottles went in first. This was followed by a typewriter. Next went the day's delicatessen purchases; then a dismantled radio, a loaf of stale pumpernickel, an empty oil can, and a crate of broken household appliances—in rapid succession. The box was having trouble digesting everything at once. It made plaintive, gagging noises. Delighted, an expression of satanic glee lighting his features, Klobbet redoubled his efforts and jammed into the box a bundle of filthy clothes, a pair of ragged sneakers, and—for a crowning touch—the overflowing garbage pails. The box was heaped mountain-high with churning refuse.

Eventually, somehow, the box lay empty again, wheezing painfully and giving an occasional strangled gasp as sudden constrictions attacked its inner circuits. "Satisfied?" Klobbet gloated maliciously. Then, chuckling, he delivered the coup de grace. He tore out the wires one by one, smashed the fuses and condensers, and splintered the delicate crystals into millions of tiny slivers.

Calmer now, sated with revenge, Klobbet thought about the half hour that had elapsed since Kelly had entered the cabin. In that short space of time he had personally, singlehanded, launched aeons of time-borne debris. At this very moment, empty beer cans, cigar butts, dirty socks, and soiled underwear were floating simultaneously past the noses of brontosauri and through the sterile streets of anti-gravity suburbs. An incredible feat—spreading rubbish up and down through all eternity—and he had done it alone! Himself! Merlin The Most!!

The victor stood and contemplated the body of his vanquished foe. It was all over now

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I Think They Love Me

By WALTER F. MOUDY

"Men, I'm here to give you the scoop. The straight scoop." The man who is talking in the lingo of our profession is dark and serious.

THE speaker's name is Slim Jim. He is just twenty-four years old, but already he is a veteran too old for active duty. There is a wild, unholy look in his eyes which tells you even better than the scars on his face the hell he's been through. Yet his hands are steady and his voice firm as he continues what is to be the first of a long series of indoctrination lectures.

"I don't know why you men signed up, and I'm not going to ask. Perhaps you got into a little trouble at home. Perhaps you were disappointed in love. Whatever the reason, that's your business. We don't ask questions here. The important thing is that you're here, and it's my business to teach you what you have to know to stay alive. Some of you will not live to complete your tours. The ones who make it may owe your lives to what you're going to learn these next few weeks. So pay attention. Your instructors are tough, hardened veterans. You will do well to listen to them."

"Tell us, man," we say. "Give us the clue."

"The enemy is cunning, and ruthless and outnumbers you a thousand to one. They possess an almost suicidal courage. They never sleep. Their spies are everywhere. Their communications system makes a modern radio look like a child's toy. The enemy will ambush you when you least expect it—and they take no prisoners! Let me repeat, gentlemen: *They never take prisoners.*"

I'll never forget the chill that runs down my spine at these last words. For the first time I am scared. I mean really scared. Oh, I've seen the newsreels, and I've read the papers. But it doesn't seem real somehow. You always figure it won't happen to you. To the other guy maybe—but not to

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you. You're on top of the world, and nothing bad can happen. But this is different than just reading about it. I mean Slim Jim has been there. He's faced them, and he's lived to tell about it. For the first time I begin to wonder if it is worth it.

I remember that wonderful feeling I had the day I signed up, that "wonderful things are bound to happen" feeling that sets the blood to racing with the promise of adventure and excitement. Of course, mom was bawling like I was already dead, and dad had that tight set look on his face like he was at a funeral or something. He kept saying, "Now, mother, he's old enough to know his own mind." But his voice was thick, and I knew he was taking it harder than she was. Down deep, I mean.

I remember the night before I left my girl friend, Ella, came over to say good bye, and for the first time she really kissed me. I mean—*really* kissed me. It was great. Just great. Cloud nine stuff. If you've ever gone to war, you know what I mean. It seems to affect girls that way.

But now as I listen to the quiet, matter-of-fact lecture by Slim Jim, I realize I am not immune. Yes, it could happen to me. In just a few short weeks our group has to be ready to face *them*. I look at Jo Jo, Ko Ko, and Bo Bo, the other members of my group, and I can see they are scared too. It is a solemn moment.

SIX weeks later we open in Des Moines, Iowa. And there for the first time we see *them*. Teenage girls! Hundreds of them. Girls in skirts and sweaters. Girls in bobby socks and two-tone shoes. Smart girls and dull ones; girls from suburbia and girls from the slums. Girls chewing gum and girls with glasses. They fill the air with their shrieks and screams; they create thunder with their feet. They fill the hall with an excitement that is so real you can almost reach out and touch it. And their nails glisten blood red in the reflected light.

We hit 'em with everything we have. Electric guitars and drums are all set for maximum amplification. We don't hold back. We open up with *Pagan Baby* and then swing right into *Panther Lady*. What I mean, we are a swinging group. We face them, and we leave them in the aisles. We can't do anything wrong tonight. Jo Jo and his Jungle Rhythm Boys are a big success.

Oh, I don't mean we aren't scared. Anyone would be scared standing up there on that lighted stage in full view, knowing that there is nothing between you and them but a few flimsy floodlights and a half dozen ineffectual po-

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licemen. You try to tell yourself that they are just normal teenage girls like you see everyday on the street, but you know it isn't so. Tonight they are the enemy. You can hear it in their thin, shrill voices; you can see it in their wide, bright eyes; and you can feel it in the rhythm of their beating feet.

We wind up our first show with *Congo Congo*. That's the one where Jo Jo advances to the front of the stage and sings the melody while the rest of us give him a chanting jungle background. It has a tricky six-four beat that really sets 'em back. Half way through the number about thirty girls charge the stage. You have to hand it to Jo Jo. The guy has guts. He doesn't lose a note. He just leans back and belts it out with all he has. He hits them square in the face with rhythm amplified twenty times. The advancing line wavers, then breaks. Fourteen girls faint. We know now we have won our first engagement.

We hardly have any trouble at all this first night in leaving the theater. Jo Jo has managed to get a copy of the city sewer line plans, so we simply slip into a manhole in the darkened alley behind the theater and come out four blocks away.

WELL, we meet them head-on in Kansas City and we lay them in the aisles in St. Louis. In Cincinnati we knock 'em dead. We are a swinging group with lotsa rhythm amplified twenty times. We are learning fast—and so far we are lucky. Except for minor scrapes and bruises and a few torn clothes we haven't had a casualty. By the time we get to Chicago we are big time. Now our training will be tested.

We come into Chicago by barge and check into our hotel. We have leaked word to the press that we would be arriving by plane at O'Hare Field, but we know they will have the other public transportation systems watched too. So while two thousand girls battled two hundred uniformed police at the airport, we are safely checked in at our hotel. The hotel, of course, has installed bars on our windows, stationed guards in the corridors, and removed all moveables from the lobby. For the moment, then, we are comparatively safe.

Jo Jo goes over the plan of operations. "Men," he says, "I have here a detailed plan of the auditorium, the connecting sewers, and the surrounding terrain. You will notice this open ground here on the north side of the auditorium. There is some cover, of course, here on the west; but, unfortunately, if we use the west entrance, we will have to cross this exposed street."

It looks bad. We can all see

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that. "How do we get in?" I ask.

"Plan C," Jo Jo replies.

There is a momentary silence. Plan C means we'll have to disguise ourselves as girls, which, with our hairdos, means we'll simply put on dresses and lipstick. "Yes," Jo Jo continues, "Plan C. We're big time now, and we gotta take our chances. Ko Ko, you'll be the swing man. We'll work our way through the crowd as close as possible to the west door, and then you'll yell as loud as you can, 'There they are! There they are! Over there!' We can't hope to move against the flow of the crowd, but we can pretend to faint and take our chances on being trampled. As soon as they've moved away from us, we all make a break for the door at the count of three. At the count of three. Got it, men?"

"Got it," we say.

"Now for the withdrawal," he says. "Disguise is out of the question, and the sewer lines leading from the auditroium aren't big enough. We're going to try something new. We're going to sing our way out!"

He pauses to let that one sink in. "Yessir, we'll march right through their middle in a direct frontal assault with the amplifiers on full blast. When we reach the exit—" He pauses again. "When we reach the exit, gentlemen, we'll run like hell."

It's a good plan. It's so simple like most good plans are. It might have worked, too, if Ko Ko hadn't gotten careless. We get in just like we'd planned with nothing more than a couple of cracked ribs and a few miscellaneous bruises and contusions. We put on our show, and then as we begin our finale, we start walking straight down the aisle dragging our extention cords behind us. They are so near we can reach out and touch them with our bare hands. Jo Jo is leading the way while Ko Ko is protecting the flank. We are only twenty feet from the rear exit when it happens. Ko Ko stumbles. He recovers quickly, but it is too late. Somehow he has disconnected the extention cord for his electric guitar. He has lost his amplification!

WHAT happens next will be forever etched in my memory. There is nothing we can do to save him. We have to stand helplessly by and watch it happen. They moved in screaming for a lock of his hair, a piece of his shirt—*anything*. I'll say this for Ko Ko, he is going down fighting, strumming his dead guitar to the last—although he surely realizes it is hopeless. He disappears in a scrambled sea of faces, arms, and legs and fingers which glisten blood red in the reflected light. Poor Ko Ko is never to be seen again.

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My first reaction to Ko Ko's death is surprising. I am glad he is dead. Yes, glad. Glad it is him instead of me. Later, of course, I feel guilty about having felt glad—until Jo Jo explains that this is normal. In fact, he admits, he feels the same way himself. I feel better after that.

But somehow the group isn't the same without Ko Ko. We go on, naturally. The show has to go on. But it just isn't the same without Ko Ko.

We get a replacement, a young kid fresh out of training who thinks a sewer is for rats and that tear-away shirts and tear-away pants are for cowards. I figure he'll last two weeks. Two weeks is all I give him.

I get a letter from Ella—the first one in a long time. It begins, "Dear John . . ." My name isn't John, and something snaps in my mind. Could she have meant the letter for someone else? It drives me crazy thinking about it.

Our next show is Yankee Stadium in New York City. The *really* big show—maybe even a full thirty minutes. We arrive at the stadium a day ahead of time and headquarter beneath the bandstand until the following evening. Hour by hour we can feel the big stadium filling up. We are surrounded, but at least we have reached the stage.

Jo Jo explains the escape plan. We will use a helicopter. It will be another first for Jo Jo. The guy's always thinking, always two steps ahead of the opposition.

Hour by hour the pressure mounts. The great stadium is overflowing. Already the screams of the crowd are blotting out all other existence. The group we are to follow finishes its act. Against our wills we peek out from our hiding place beneath the bandstand. The Gover Boys are mounting an armored tank and trying to wedge their way through the crowd.

"The fools!" Jo Jo murmurs.

We watch as a hundred unhurried hands overturn the tank and spill its contents onto the fresh green earth of the stadium. We wonder if grass which has tasetd blood will ever again be satisfied with water.

Something breaks inside me. "I'm not going! I'm not going up there!" I cry.

Jo Jo slaps my face. "Shut up," he says. "Get hold of yourself, man." He slaps me again, softer this time. "We are all depending on you," he adds as the tears come to my eyes.

He turns to the others. "Now check your amplifiers, and let's get up there."

I don't say anything. The others are looking at me strangely. Then I have this sudden inspiration. I don't know why I haven't

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thought of it before. Of course. That had to be the answer. "I'm all right now," I say shyly. I am too. It's so simple once you figure it out.

We go onstage. There must be over eighty-thousand of them out there. But I'm not scared. Not any more. As we do the show, I notice Jo Jo glancing up to make sure the helicopter is still hovering overhead. Jo Jo is always so very careful. But it's all so unnecessary. I mean, I've finally figured it out. *I think they love me.*

Think about that for a moment.

We do our last number, and the helicopter lowers on schedule. Jo Jo and the others try to force me aboard, but I won't go. I can't bear to think of disappointing eighty-thousand adoring fans. Why they'd give anything just to touch me, just to have a piece of the clothes which I wear, or a lock of my hair. How can I disappoint these nice kids.

I am all alone now except for eighty-thousand affectionate youngsters who are shouting their love for me. It's good to be loved.

And here they come!

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

What looks like the foundation stones of a new saga are beginning to shape up in FANTASTIC. Some issues back we published **Roger Zelazny's** Passage to Dilfar. Now the saga of Dilvish and his magic steed that "men called Black" enters its second instalment with Thelinde's Song—a tale of a beautiful young girl, a legend, a witch, and a creature from the depths of Evil-land.

Also: the concluding installment of **Keith Laumer's** Web novel, The Other Side of Time.

June FANTASTIC, goes on sale at your newsstand May 20.

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FANTASY BOOKS

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Worlds of Weird, *edited by Leo Margulies. 158 pages. Pyramid Books, 50¢.*

Here is the second of what I trust is going to be an infinite series of paperback anthologies from the files of the legendary fantasy magazine, WEIRD TALES. Seven more stories, drawn from the fertile 1932-1939 period when Farnsworth Wright was still in editorial command, make up this new volume.

If it doesn't quite match the high level of its predecessor, that's not a serious fault in view of the standard set the first time out. The most powerful story in this volume is "Valley of the Worm," by Robert E. Howard—a little-known non-Conan item set in a world of Norse mythology. Connoisseurs of rugged prose will relish such high moments as this, as the hero-narrator launches his climactic attack on the worm-monster:

"The spongy skin yielded and gave beneath my feet, and I drove my sword hilt-deep, dragging it through the pulpy flesh, ripping a horrible yard-long wound, from which oozed a green slime. Then a flip of a cable-like tentacle flicked me from the titan's back and spun me three hundred feet through the air to crash among a cluster of giant trees."

They don't make monsters like that any more—or heroes, for that matter.

Another good one is Edmond Hamilton's "He That Hath Wings," which should help to dispel the belief that thirty years ago Hamilton was capable of writing only formula space-opera. This story is moving and sensitive, with a depth of emotion rarely found in the pulp stories of that era. Clark Ashton Smith's "Mother of Toads" is a lovely little chiller, less vocabulary-bound than most of Smith's work. And David H. Keller's deceptively simple "The Thing in the Cellar" is still good for a shudder or three even now. Frank Belknap Long's "Giants in the Sky," though minor, is a science-fiction story whose imagery is often rewarding to the reader.

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The two longest stories in the book attempt more, and are not entirely successful at it. Seabury Quinn's famous Christmas story, "Roads," has many admirers, and I do not feel diposed to criticize it; it tells the story of a Northman named Klaus who is present at Bethlehem and at Calvary, and who survives to take on a role in Christian mythology himself. Quinn's prose is worthy of his theme, and the notion of a worshipper of Odin kneeling before the infant Jesus is superb, but I am troubled by anachronisms in the story and by the fact that Quinn lapses too often into cinematic cliches that mar an otherwise flawless accomplishment. The last story is Nictzin Dyalhis' "The Sapphire Goddess," and I found it hard to enter its mood of whimsy.

Virgil Finlay has contributed black-and-white illustrations for the book, most of them ruined by horrendous reproduction. A particular highlight is Sam Moskowitz' brief introduction, which tells of the founding of WEIRD TALES and provides information I've never seen in print before.

The Synthetic Man, *by Theodore Sturgeon. 174 pages. Pyramid Books, 50¢.*

Before the first issue of FANTASTIC appeared, Ziff-Davis used to publish a magazine called FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, thick and ragged-edged and full of improbable tales. In the February, 1950 issue of that defunct magazine there appeared a complete novel called "The Dreaming Jewels," by Theodore Sturgeon, whose opening paragraph has rarely been rivaled for sheer audacity. It read:

"They caught the kid doing something disgusting out under the bleachers at the high-school stadium, and he was sent home from the grammar school across the street. He was eight years old then. He'd been doing it for years."

The reader who survived that trumpet-call found himself enmeshed in a fantasy-world of almost uncomfortable vividness. The background was carnival life, and most of the characters were freaks, but Sturgeon never played it for pure horror, nor lapsed into the sentimentality that seems to engulf Bradbury whenever he approaches similar themes. The result was one of Sturgeon's most successful novels, wholly unforgettable. Some time later it appeared in book form under its present less evocative title, and here it is in a third printing with a handsome new Schoenherr cover painting.

There aren't many fantasy novels that match the wild poetry and fevered invention of this one. Get it.

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The Spot of Life, *by Austin Hall. 187 pages. Ace Books, 40¢.*

Last time out I dumped some bricks on the goofy, ill-written novel to which this is the sequel, "The Blind Spot." Not at all surprisingly, Ace has now produced the companion volume. A bit to my mystification, I find that it is both better and worse than the first.

"The Blind Spot" was written by Hall in collaboration with Homer Eon Flint, and scarcely makes sense from one paragraph to the next. The present book, which dates from 1932, is the work of Hall alone. It is much more orderly: the prose is grammatical, if drab, and the story line progresses neatly toward its conclusion. That's the trouble, too. "The Blind Spot," for all its monumental flaws, had a kind of breathless foolishness about it that made it fun to read, if you can find fun in watching authors working close to the line of illiteracy. There is no such fun in "The Spot of Life," which plods along from step to step in the unraveling of its dreary mysteries. It's much shorter, missing the baroque overelaboration of the earlier book, and lacks even the feeble spark of life that one had.

Convention Annual No. 3. *Discon Edition, 1963, edited by Jay Kay Klein. 103 pages, $2.50.*

Inclusion of this item here is justified by the fact that it's a pictorial account of the 1963 World S-F Convention, held in Washington, D.C. As anyone who has ever attended one knows, a convention is an experience of pure fantasy, and so this is a fantasy book if there ever was one.

Jay Kay Klein is a deft man with a photoflash, who gets all over a convention, recording it all on film without ever seeming to intrude on the scenes he's immortalizing. This bulky volume has 284 photos of the convention, well reproduced. Each of them has a lengthy descriptive caption, revealing an unexpected comic flair on Klein's part. (He has some good fun with Hans Stefan Santesson, takes cheerful pokes at Sam Moskowitz and John Campbell, and slyly nudges Cele Goldsmith Lalli once or twice.) Aside from those notables, you'll find photos of everyone else who was on hand, both at the formal sessions and at the not-so-formal—including the likes of Isaac Asimov, E. E. Smith, Forry Ackerman, Murray Leinster/Will Jenkins, Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, Emsh, James Blish, Judy Merril, Frederik Pohl, and a few hundred others. The masquerade party is well covered, though some of the masqueraders aren't.

My favorite shots both show

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The 23rd World Science Fiction Convention will be held in the Mount Royal Hotel, London, from August 27th to 30th, 1965. Guest of Honor will be Brian Aldiss. Membership fees are: 15 shillings or $2.00 for non-attending members and 21 shillings or $3.00 for attendees. The Treasurer is: James Groves, 29 Lathom Road, London. E6. U.S. Agent is: Bill Evans, Box 86, Mt. Ranier, Maryland.

Damon Knight: #197, showing the famed critic beaming in a forest of female legs, and #213, with Damon beaming even more broadly while Fred Pohl delivers a demonic smile. The book's available from Klein at 219 Sabine Street, Syracuse, New York 13204.

The First Men in the Moon, *by H. G. Wells. 160 pages. Ballantine Books, 50¢.*

Wells is now going into the public domain in this country, and paperback editions of his works spring up on all sides. This one, written more than sixty years ago, is being reissued in connection with its release as a motion picture, "in Dynamation and Lunacolor"—a fact that might have startled its author a bit, if he had been able to look forward from the turn of the century to see its ultimate fate.

The story ought to be familiar. It's the one about the English gentlemen who build a spaceship covered with an anti-gravity metal and float off to the moon, which is populated and involved in turmoil. It's fine fun, and Stanton Coblentz has rewritten it only thirty times so far, so the original is worth examining. Don't mistake it for science-fiction, though. It's pure fantasy, as even Jules Verne grumbled long ago.

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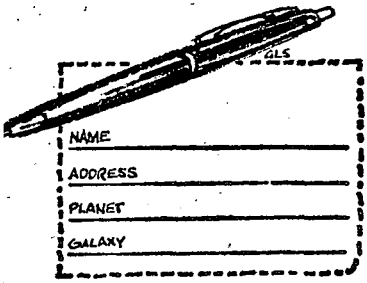

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(continued from page 116)

—except for one last thing. Yes, even an enemy was entitled to a decent burial. He wrestled the box through the back door and dragged it out to a creek that flowed several yards behind the cabin. "Revenge is sweet," he reflected as he slid the box into the water. It filled quickly and sank.

Klobbet didn't even have time to grasp the significance of the wide, deep whirlpool that suddenly formed on the surface of the water—because he disappeared. His unoccupied clothes remained standing rigidly for a brief moment—as though they were being displayed by an invisible mannikin—then they collapsed in a neat pile. The whirlpool was gone, too.

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THE END

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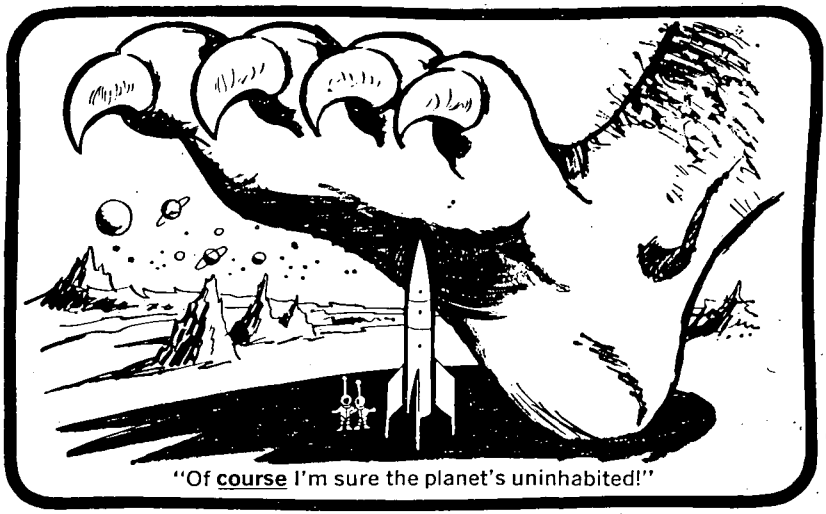

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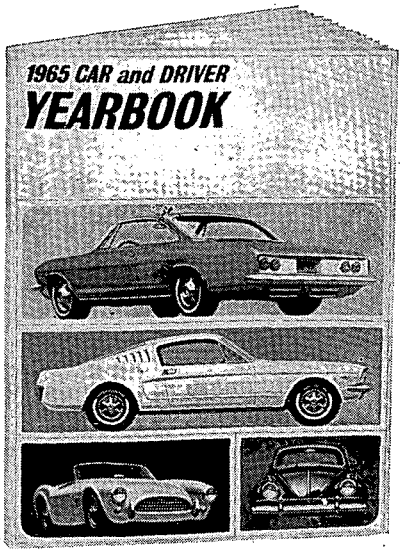

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